

TEN CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE DESIGN AND PREPARATION OF NATIONAL POLITICAL DIALOGUE PROCESSES

1. Where does a national political dialogue derive its mandate from?

The mandate of a national political dialogue is usually negotiated among key political, social and military actors. Once negotiated, the mandate is usually endorsed by the relevant existing state institutions. National political dialogues benefit from clear mandates which are agreed upon through detailed negotiations and which are endorsed by the widest possible group of actors and institutions. Such negotiations and endorsements ensure that major actors are committed to the dialogue and agree on the goals of the dialogue. This strengthens the legitimacy of the dialogue and reduces the possibility of disagreement, once the dialogue commences, regarding its goals and powers.

In cases where negotiation among all major groups and endorsement by the widest possible number of actors and institutions does not occur, there is a risk that some groups refuse to participate in the dialogue or may actively undermine it.

2. What are the key elements of a mandate?

National political dialogues benefit from a clear and manageable mandate, and a well-defined relationship to ongoing political processes which is negotiated prior to the commencement of the dialogue. Those responsible for preparing national political dialogues negotiate the following questions:

- What will the dialogue discuss?

It is important that the list of issues to be discussed by the dialogue is manageable and not over-ambitious. A long list of issues may lead to some of them not being properly discussed.

- What powers will the dialogue have?

A national political dialogue may have the power to provide recommendations which other existing institutions (eg parliament or government) can adopt or reject. Alternatively, the dialogue may take decisions which other institutions are required to accept. A hybrid model would give a political dialogue strong decision-making powers, but would also give other institutions the authority to discuss the dialogue's decisions before endorsing them.

- How will the dialogue relate to existing institutions?

National political dialogues usually do not formally report to existing state institutions during their deliberations. However, in some cases, representatives of the government or parliament participate in the dialogue. This allows these institutions to follow developments within the dialogue and may encourage them to implement the dialogue's decisions.

- How long will the dialogue last?

Given that national political dialogues attempt to address contentious and complex issues, they need enough time to discuss everything on their agenda, negotiate the needed reforms, and reach agreements. At the same time, dialogue processes may lose momentum and

direction, if they last too long. The public may lose interest in the dialogue and the country's leaders may not be able to sustain their engagement in it for a long period of time. Therefore, those who design and prepare political dialogues need to agree on a duration which allows for adequate deliberation without risking losing momentum, direction, and attention by leaders and public.

3. How large should a national political dialogue be?

National political dialogue processes aim to generate a society-wide consensus on key reforms that a country needs to adopt. In order to reach such a consensus, a wide array of constituencies often needs to be represented. As a result, those preparing national political dialogues are faced with the dilemma of how large the dialogues should be.

Smaller national political dialogues of a couple or a few hundred participants tend to have the following characteristics:

- they may be easier to manage;
- they may be able to meet in plenary frequently;
- they may conduct substantive discussions in the plenary with relative efficiency;
- they may need to be divided in only a few and relatively small working groups;
- however, small dialogues may not succeed in incorporating all segments of society and may therefore be criticized for excluding important constituencies.

Large national political dialogues of close to a thousand or more participants have the following characteristics:

- they are able to incorporate a large number of constituencies;
- they may require careful management throughout their duration;
- they may not be able to meet in plenary frequently;
- they may not be able to discuss substantive issues in-depth in plenary;
- they may need to be divided in several working groups some of which may themselves be large;
- they may require detailed and carefully designed rules of procedure to enable the effective participation of most of their participants.

When designing the size of the political dialogue, those responsible need to consider both the political and managerial implications of their choice.

4. Which constituencies are usually represented in a national political dialogue?

Given that the goal of national political dialogues is to generate society-wide consensus on major reforms that a country needs to adopt, it is important that as many political, military and social groups are included in the dialogue. Most political dialogues include the main political parties, armed groups and civil society organizations. In some cases, professional associations and state institutions are also included. Most dialogues ensure the representation of women, youth and marginalized groups.

The following are some considerations in deciding the composition of a national political dialogue:

- what groups have sizeable constituencies and can claim to be the legitimate representatives of these constituencies?
- what groups have the power to influence the implementation of any decisions the political dialogue may take?
- what groups have a track record of working in an impartial and non-partisan manner to solve some of the country's problems?
- what groups have creative ideas on how to solve the country's problems?
- what groups have expertise and knowledge on the issues discussed by the dialogue?

Based on the above considerations, a combination of political, military, state and civil society actors is likely to generate a wide consensus. In order to achieve this representation, political dialogues often reserve a sizeable number of seats for independents, civil society actors, expert professionals, women and youth.

5. What is the working method of a national political dialogue?

Most dialogues tend to divide their work between plenary meetings and working groups. Given that the plenary may include several hundred participants, the development of proposals and drafting of decisions tends to take place in working groups. As a result, most of the substantive work of a national political dialogue may take place in working groups.

This means that working groups need to be carefully designed based on the following considerations:

- working groups need to have balanced representation in order to ensure that their proposals are accepted by all constituencies participating in the dialogue;
- working groups need to have clear rules of procedure in order to ensure that they function efficiently and effectively;
- national political dialogues benefit from clear rules outlining the relationship between the plenary and the working groups;
- national political dialogues benefit from a mechanism which facilitates regular communication among the various working groups and ensures that most participants are aware of developments in most working groups;
- national political dialogues benefit from a mechanism which tracks developments in the various working groups and ensures the cohesion of the dialogue's proceedings;
- national political dialogues benefit from a conflict resolution mechanisms which assists the members of working groups to overcome disputes and reach agreements.

National political dialogues which last a few months tend to meet a few times in plenary form, while their working groups may meet daily for extensive periods of time and reconvene after short breaks. In general, political dialogues tend to meet and work intensively.

6. What decision-making rules do national political dialogues usually adopt?

The rules and procedures through which national political dialogues take decisions tend to be negotiated in detail prior to the launch of the dialogue. When designing the decision-making rules, the following questions need to be answered:

- Will the national political dialogue take decisions through consensus or through some form of majority voting?
- If voting is used, will it be based on a demanding majority or a simple majority?
- Will the same decision-making procedures apply to all issues discussed in the dialogue?
- If the participants of the dialogue are divided into working groups, will these working groups have the same decision-making rules as the plenary of the dialogue?
- Will the plenary have the responsibility to simply adopt or reject the proposals developed by the working groups or will the plenary also amend these proposals?

Given that national political dialogues aim to generate society-wide discussion and consensus on important issues, their decision-making rules usually emphasize consensus. Given that consensus is difficult to achieve, the rules of procedure of the dialogue usually provide for a deadlock breaking mechanism which is responsible for helping the participants negotiate agreements. Such a mechanism facilitates negotiations among the participants of working groups as well as among the leaders of the constituencies represented in the dialogue in order to ensure that agreements are reached.

7. Who contributes to the preparations of national political dialogues?

The preparation of national political dialogues tends to be a highly political and contentious process. The question of who contributes to the preparation of the dialogue is contentious and may influence the legitimacy of the dialogue. There are usually three considerations regarding the participants of the preparatory process:

- The preparations of a national political dialogue benefit from the active participation and support of the leaders of all key constituencies. High-level support of the preparations ensures that the decisions of the preparatory process will be implemented.
- Ideally, all relevant constituencies should participate in the preparations of the national political dialogue. This ensures that the decisions taken are perceived as legitimate by most constituencies.
- The preparations benefit from technical and expert support which may not be available among those responsible for the preparations.

8. Administrative and logistical planning

National political dialogues are complex events and require detailed administrative preparations and logistical planning. These preparations can be contentious and political. For example, the selection of the venue(s) for a national political dialogue is often not only a logistical task, but also a political one due to security and symbolic considerations. Also, the establishment of administrative and expert support structures for a national political dialogue can be a political task as the constituencies participating in the dialogue may wish to influence these structures. It is therefore advisable that the administrative planning is given great attention and, if possible, is carried out by the same body preparing the political aspects of the dialogue.

9. Secretariat support to national political dialogues

National political dialogue processes need extensive administrative, logistical and expert support. This support tends to cover the following areas:

- logistical issues: transportation and accommodation of participants; servicing of the venue(s); and security.
- secretarial issues: note taking, information sharing among the dialogue participants; management of documentation; and, archiving.
- expert support: advice on technical and substantive issues through presentations by experts, submissions of papers or seminars; and, training.
- media relations and public outreach: providing footage to the media, managing a website, organizing public information campaigns, setting up information points throughout the country, preparing debates on television, etc.

Usually, a secretariat capacity is established prior to the launch of the political dialogue.

10. Public awareness and participation

When the public is well-informed about the discussions taking place during a national political dialogue, the dialogue is likely to be trusted and to enjoy greater legitimacy. Therefore, transparency and information sharing strengthen the legitimacy of a dialogue process. When designing a public information and awareness-raising strategy, it is important to ensure that the information reaches as wide of a spectrum of society as possible. For example, if a country has high rates of illiteracy, information needs to be shared through media that reach the illiterate population. Similarly, if in certain parts of a country certain information media are not available, the appropriate media need to be identified.

Additionally, the public could be engaged in the discussions of the national political dialogue. This may take place through large town hall gatherings or smaller meetings with specific constituencies. It may also include the submission of proposals to the dialogue by civil society and other groups.

National political dialogues benefit from a dedicated body, usually located inside the secretariat supporting the dialogue, which carries out the various public information and participation activities.

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