

National Dialogue in Ethnically Divided Ethiopia: Experiences and Lessons to be Learnt

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Abstract

National dialogues serve as political processes geared toward generating accord in times of deep political crisis and in post-war situations. The armed conflict and political unrest in Ethiopia necessitates national dialogue. However, it has only been one time since 1991 that the EPRDF government established a peace talk commission. The theme of this paper is to investigate the national dialogue parameters and their practicability over the multifold problems of Ethiopia. It also tries to study the national dialogue experiences and show some lessons to be learnt. It was investigated through qualitative research approach; secondary sources of data were rigorously employed and the time framework covers 1991 onwards. According to the finding, the success and failure of different national dialogues have been linked with components such as the mandate, the public buy in, the political context and elites' interest. The 1991 national dialogue even avowed that these parameters had a pervasive degree of influence and serve as components of national dialogues. The success of national dialogue in Ethiopia seems to rest up on the inclusion of different stake holders in the political process.

Keywords: Ethiopia, National Dialogue, Reconciliation

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1. Introduction

National dialogues are: “nationally in hand political processes geared toward generating accord among a broad vary of national stakeholders in times of deep political crisis, in post-war things or throughout comprehensive political transitions” (Blunck et al., 2017). They're generally attended by broader social group consultations, involving all sectors of society. Their objective will involve broad based modification processes (e.g. negotiating a brand new social contract) or a lot of slender objectives.

Despite the fact that national dialogue emerged as a process and attention of scholars recently, countries in Africa, Europe and Latin America have been using it as a process of transforming divisive and repressive political order to a democratic one. National dialogues in South Africa's post-apartheid transitional justice that gave worldwide prominence to the use of truth and reconciliation commission as a framework of transitional justice, the experiences in Liberia, Sierra Leone and Kenya amplifies how the choice of the transitional justice measure that a society in transition adopts constitutes an outcome of and a vehicle for the implementation of a (new) political settlement (Haider, 2019). From Togo (2006) to Yemen (2013–2014), national dialogues are increasingly regarded as a promising avenue for managing political crises and transitions by organizing broad-based and inclusive negotiations on a national scale.

National Dialogues have been held throughout modern history and across the world under different names and in various contexts. For example, the American constitution-making process of 1787 was arguably a form of National Dialogue as it included representatives of all states in a negotiation on the future direction of the nation. Political reforms, transition processes, and the creation of new constitutions were aided by procedures similar to National Dialogues in Southern Europe (e.g., Portugal, Spain) and South East Asia (e.g., South Korea, the Philippines) in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the mid-1990s, political reforms coupled with constitution-making and peacemaking procedures happened in South-East Asia and Latin America. Striving to be inclusive, many shared capabilities regular of today's National Dialogues. For example in Thailand, the brand new Constitutional Drafting Assembly (1996–1997) turned into produced from each provincial representative and criminal and educational experts. Domestic dialogue has continued to contribute for the past 15 years Peace process, political reform and / or constitutional enactment Somalia (2000, 2002-2004), worldwide tests from Afghanistan (2002, 2003–2004) and Nepal (2008–2012) to Egypt (2011), Yemen (2013-2014) and Tunisia (2013-2014) (Elayah et al., 2020).

In the early 1990s, National Dialogues had been famous in numerous African nations. Inclusive constitution-making negotiations regularly took the call of so-referred to as country wide meetings with the mandate to facilitate nonviolent and sustainable political reform. For example, the 1990 National Conference in Benin sought to ease the stress generated via way of means of a deep monetary crisis and a parallel erosion of political legitimacy. In the subsequent months and years, Gabon prepared its very own conference (1990), accompanied via way of means of Republic of Congo-Brazzaville (1991), Togo (1991), Mali (1991), Niger (1991), Zaire— main to the Democratic Republic of the Congo—(1991–1992), and Chad (1993) (*See Annex of the AU Panel of the Wise Report “Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges in*

the Fight against Impunity” – AFRICAN UNION DRAFT TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE POLICY FRAMEWORK., 2013).

Before 1991, Ethiopia was a centralized state and national unity was one of its political tenets. But after the fall of the military regime in May 1991, the country was reconstructed as a federal entity, in which different ethnic groups had significant levels of autonomy. Over the years, this decentralized structure not only polarized the nation to the brink of implosion, but also led to certain ethnic groups – such as Tigrayans who controlled The Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front through the TPLF – ruling over and oppressing others.

The aim of the paper is thus to elucidate the national dialogue components, to see selected national dialogue experiences in the world and stockpiling lessons for Ethiopia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Concepts of National Dialogue

There are several open queries and uncertainties relating to the conception of national dialogue; which there are restricted resources that give steerage and sensible support for people who are exploring national dialogues (Blunck et al., 2017). Effective national dialogue is hard to define albeit so far as many authors are concerned effective national dialogue is a dialogue that multiple stakeholders (but not all multiple stakeholders) take part in. It is formally mandated at the high political level often, broader social consultations take place at different times and in different forms (eg, consultations, committees, referendums). It also addresses the issue of basic national importance that is commonly raised in situations where a country has experienced armed conflict, war, or a mass uprising at the hands of a frustrated mass. These may include peace building, political reform or constitutional amendments. It also involves key parties involved in a particular issue, usually governments, major opposition parties, and representatives of civil society or businesses with the larger circle of each society.

In Ethiopian context, National Dialogue” means consultation of different bodies facilitated by the Council of Commissions at the Federal and Regional level on the Agendas identify in accordance with this Proclamation and the Directives to be issued by the Council of Commissions (MOMP, 2018).

Table1: National Dialogues held between 1990 and 2014

Country	Year(s)	Name of National Dialogue
Afghanistan	2002	Emergency Loya Jirga (ELJ)
	2003-2004	Constitutional Loya Jirga (CLJ)
Benin	1990	Conference of the Vital Forces of the Nation
Democratic Republic of Congo	2001-2003	Inter-Congolese Dialogue
Egypt	2011	National Dialogue
Mali	1991	National Conference
Mexico	1995-1996	San Andres Dialogues
Nepal	2008-2012	The Constituent Assembly
Papua New Guinea	1997	Burnham Dialogues
Somalia	2000	The Somali National Reconciliation Conference (Djibouti process)
	2002-2004	The Somalia National Peace Conference (Eldoret/Mbagathi process)
Somaliland*	1993	The Borama National Conference
South Africa	1991-1992	Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA)
	1993	Multi-Party Negotiation Process (MPNP)
Togo	1991	National Conference
	2006	Inter-Togolese Dialogue
Yemen	2013-2014	National Dialogue Conference

Adapted from (Paffenholz et al., 2017)

2.2. National Dialogue Components

Based on National Dialogues held between 1990 and 2014, the following are the components for the success otherwise failure of national dialogues.

2.2.1. Mandate: The national dialogue process has many mandates in transitional situations. In some cases, they spurred a political transition: they appointed an interim government, an interim constitution, and a constituent parliament (Papagianni, n.d.). In other cases, they drafted the Constitution themselves, in other cases; they drafted the principles of the Constitution submitted to the Constitutional Drafting Authority. In other cases, domestic dialogue has shaped a future negotiation process that involves all parties in the political process in a simple but meaningful way and makes binding decisions. In these latter cases, the purpose of the dialogue was to build sufficient trust and schematize the process by which the country could solve some of the most controversial issues (Papagianni, n.d.).

2.2.2. The political context: the political during which a national dialogue takes place can have an effect on the

chance of success or failure, one of which is a political will that is linked to alternative shift processes. National dialogues ought to be embedded in larger modification processes so as to push real structural change. If disconnected to other political processes, reminiscent of constitution-making, they're doubtless to be counter-productive (Paffenholz et al., 2017). Footing among parties can also affect national dialogue as the absence of diametrically opposed political camps will make it a lot of likely to make a typical read or shared objectives in dialogue, leaving the method to maneuver forward. In contrast, drastically completely different views will exacerbate distrust and stall the process (Haider, 2019).

2.2.3. Public buy-in: public support or lack can alter or constrain progress within the national dialogue process. The degree of buy-in is influenced by the supply of public information, smart communication, and media engagement – all of that have an effect on the amount of transparency and understanding of the process. Learning from past experience lies at the heart of a national dialogue. National dialogues have benefitted from dialogue experience and learning from past national dialogues.

2.2.4. The role of external actors and national ownership: support (e.g. political, financial and technical support) or resistance of external actors will influence the degree of success of national dialogues. It's necessary to strike a balance between external support and national ownership. The latter can increase the chance of public buy-in, perceptions of legitimacy – and probabilities of implementation.

2.2.5. Process factors: The degree of inclusion and participation: the overwhelming majority of literature emphasizes that the transformative potential of national dialogues can solely be completed if they're genuinely comprehensive of society. So as to be actually inclusive, it's necessary to assist balance power asymmetries and guarantee actual decision-making power. Extremely inclusive and democratic national dialogues might render discussions unwieldy, however, and build it troublesome to resolve key political questions. The success of national dialogues will rely in massive half on finding the proper equilibrium between potency and inclusiveness. three illustration and choice criteria: established selection criteria and procedures for participants in national dialogues can support or hinder the broad representation of completely different social and political groups. Transparency within the criteria is considerably necessary.

2.2.6. Objective and scope-setting: it's important to avoid overburdening mandates and agendas. It is difficult to strike a balance between the breadth of the mandate, potency and independence. Whereas a narrower mandate will be a lot of manageable and efficient, it can limit the area for modification and will contribute to the persistence of an elite led process. Clarity and connection to native populations are key characteristics to adopt in account an appropriate mandate and agenda (Paffenholz et al., 2017). Addressing development problems and peace dividends at the first can be necessary to the success of national dialogues. Institutional framework and support structures: a comprehensive support structure of important actors on the point of competitive parties will facilitate participants to be ready (with the necessary experience and tools), to compromise and to make coalitions, permitting them time to agree on common positions. Such structures do not, however, essentially improve the quality of participation or guarantee implementation. Role of authority figures: a credible, generally accepted, independent, revered and attractive convener, intermediary or assistant can considerably have an effect on the strength of the national dialogue, indicating seriousness and trust within the process (El-Battahani, 2014).

2.2.7. Decision-making procedures: these will alter or constrain the flexibility of national dialogues to achieve an agreement and implement it. Whereas accord can facilitate to expand agendas and to incorporate often excluded voices, an inability to reach consensus benefits the older forces, because the absence of movement can mean protective the standing quo... Confidence-building measures: national dialogues must be amid a series of steps to attenuate tensions, so as to determine level of “working trust” to have interaction in a very meaty dialogue. Trust-building is very important throughout all phases in order to confirm that agreements are implemented. Provision for implementation: it's necessary to ensure that sufficient funds for implementation, experience and responsibility mechanisms are in place, specified key actors might feel sure by what has been agreed.

2.3. Experiences of National Dialogue in Selected Countries

The reason behind selecting the aforementioned states is to show the successes and failures under the fact that these states are leveled as third world, thus they take after Ethiopia in plethora of ways. Moreover, these states have experienced seemingly similar political contexts.

2.3.1. Yemen

The 2013 Yemen National Dialogue Conference failed in achieving the comprehensiveness of the dialogue process. This prohibited a diverse group of political and social actors in Yemeni society, including small parties, young people, women, and other groups traditionally excluded from political decision-making around the table (Blunck et al., 2017; Papagianni, n.d.). In addition, the dialogue suffers from various setbacks and challenges. First, despite the great efforts to participate and the requirement that half of the representatives from the South, the main leaders of al Hiraak South abstained from the NDC from the beginning, and the legitimacy of the

NDC's final agreement. Participants lacked the grassroots leverage needed to facilitate acceptance of NDC outcomes (Kestemont, 2018; Sodikin, 2014). Second, the process was inefficient and sometimes plagued by inadequate technical know-how (Kestemont, 2018).

2.3.2. Benin

Originally conceived as a council, the National Conference in Benin quickly evolved. Declared to rule and expel President Mathieu Kerek, from his power, he has been in office since 1972. Official Name: "Conference National des force lives de lanation" (National Vitality Conference) had a wide civil society involvement (mainly teachers, students, civil servants) similar to conceptualization as a social mobilization event (Paffenholz et al., 2017). On December 2, 1990, Benin held a referendum. New Constitution Adopted-Presidential and Multi-Party System was established 1991 election. That same year, Kerek left peacefully. Today, Benin is considered one of the most stable democracies in Africa (See *Annex of the AU Panel of the Wise Report "Peace, Justice and Reconciliation in Africa: Opportunities and Challenges in the Fight against Impunity" – AFRICAN UNION DRAFT TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE POLICY FRAMEWORK.*, 2013)

3. Materials and Methods

Scholars have been studying different national dialogue experiments by employing different parameters however; no study has been made to look in to the Ethiopian national dialogues from the 1991 peace talks onwards. The failure to address this

The paper was analyzed with the frameworks of qualitative research approach and followed case study design. To achieve the main objective of the study, this paper adopts most importantly a retrospective prospective method because of the fact that it mainly focused on the national dialogue experience of Ethiopia with in the last 30 years particularly since 1991 when the Dergue regime demised and EPRDF led national peace talks was underway and to stockpile lessons for the ongoing national dialogue. The paper encompasses the concepts of national dialogue, reconciliation, and mainly focused on the main components of national dialogues. The data sources of the paper are legal documents, different journals and reports of national dialogues of different countries were employed as a source.

4. Discussion

4.1. Experience of National Dialogue in Ethiopia

History has done a lot to shape the perceptions of the other side, often in a way that people of different identities struggled to overcome the obstacles of distrust and stereotype. The history of Ethiopia is a history of war and conquest; however, interethnic conflicts have been rare. Thus, the main catalyst for conflicting perceptions believed to have started from 1880s onwards when a legacy of antagonism got its inception from. The ambivalence about the history of Ethiopia resulted in the proliferation of three groups (the cessationist, the nationalist and . Paradoxically, the nation building that successive emperors carried out or perhaps attempted required assimilation and the policy seemed to have been seen mostly by Oromo elites and Tigryan nationalists as an ecumenism of Ethiopians. As a result, this served as an impetus for identity question.

After the demise of Dergue, an American sponsored peace talks in London and the July Convention of Nationalities in Adiss Ababa were held in 1991 with the following objectives:

- a. The formation of multinational parliament
- b. The creation of transitional government and a multinational cabinet
- c. A new regional administrative division of the country based on language and nationality
- d. The holding of general elections aimed to pave the way for the nationwide election and regional elections scheduled for 1993 (*Ethiopia: From Bullets to the Ballot Box: The Bumpy Road to Democracy and the Political Economy of Transition by Kinfé Abraham, - Africa World Press & The Red Sea Press, n.d.*)

Delegations of 24 nationality movements participated and representatives of 22 international bodies and governments were invited as observers¹. The total delegates were well over 500 and the conference formed a multinational council or parliament in which the 87 seats were distributed. Out of the 87, EPRDF and OLF took 32 and 12 consequently (*Ethiopia: From Bullets to the Ballot Box: The Bumpy Road to Democracy and the Political Economy of Transition by Kinfé Abraham, - Africa World Press & The Red Sea Press, n.d.*). The conference was successful in a sense that delegates² of various nations and organizations were invited and were

¹ The following governments and international organizations were represented at the conference as observers 1. The Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLP) 2. The United Nations Organization 3. The Organization of African Unity 4. The European Economic Community 5. The United States of America, 6. The Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics, 7. Great Britain 8. Japan 9. Sweden 10. Sudan 11. Nigeria 12. Kenya

13. Italy 14. France 15. The Republic of Djibouti 16. Canada 17. China 18 Australia 19. The Ad hoc Committee for Peace 20. The Ethiopian Catholic Church

21. The Ethiopian Orthodox Church 22. The All Ethiopian Islamic Association

² The delegates were: 1. The Ethiopian People Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) 2. The Beninshangul Peoples Liberation Front (BPLM) 3. The Ethiopian Democratic Union (EDU) 4. The Ethiopian Democratic Council (EDC) 5. The Ethiopian National Democratic

given equal chances to voice. Moreover, as part from the EPRDF's prowess, the inclusions of small nationalities like The Kambata and large nations like The Oromo was seen as EPRDF's will for democracy and orderliness. However, the lively democratic debate has at times alternated with a temptation to switch back to arms.

Given the complexity of Ethiopia's multinational composition and its historical nurtured villain i.e. Amhara, in the making of the transitional charter and future directions in 1991, the dialogue was not inclusive as the people of Amhara were excluded from the talks either intentionally or boycotted the process due to dissatisfaction. In the 1991 peace talks, lack of personnel on the Amhara side has also meant that the dialogue was not inclusive and taken lower results as it might have given an introvert mentality for the rest of ethnic groups against the Amhara.

"After discovering that they have parallel concerns about the future of the country and after coming to public expression by conference, there had to be no place for switching back to arms" (Abraham,1994).

According to Abraham (1994), the existing culture of dialogue that Ethiopians developed for long, multi-group membership, and involvement of opposition parties in power were some hopes shown while the government buy-in to a clean break with the past and fostering new path through national dialogue is too minimal for the establishment of the peace talk was linked with dwindling international pressure.

4.2. Lessons to be learnt

To begin with the progress, the bill establishing the Commission of National Reconciliation in 2018 declares that it will "pave the way for national consensus while maintaining the country's integrity." The bill received 287 votes in Ethiopia's federal parliamentary assembly, with 13 votes against it and one abstention. Experts, on the other hand, have criticized the exclusion of factions battling the federal army. According to Tsedale Lemma, CEO of Jakenn Publishing, publisher of the influential Addis Standard magazine, the commission's formation could be a response to the international community's repeated requests for a cease-fire and inclusive engagement to end the violence (*Ethiopia to Create National Dialogue Commission | News | DW | 30.12.2021*, n.d.).

The experience of different states teach us that lack of state institution and the political will to transform the people to normality, impotence to establish fact finding bodies and elites rejection of the dialogue due to uneven representation were taken to be the bottlenecks for the success of a national dialogue. The success of national dialogue in Ethiopia seems to rest up on three different times: pre national dialogue, during national dialogue and after national dialogue.

Conflicting narratives are behind the Annus horribilis of Ethiopia and these unverified histories ought to be revised objectively or have common collective memories so that warring groups will not regress back to destructive future. To dwindle doubt, there has to be a positive discrimination for the victims prior to the dialogue.

The technical aspects are significant and have implications for the later process. Before the national dialogue is put in motion, the preparatory process will have to be developed, often with an institutional infrastructure of its own. The same procedures need to be applied to the preparatory bodies. What should be the Terms of References for those bodies? The choice of preparatory format is mostly determined by the aim of the process, the resources available, and the interests of the main stakeholders. In the end, a working consensus should emerge first and foremost on the central aim of the national dialogue, as well as key principles. During the preparation phase a consensus is needed on core objectives, such as: seeking to reconstruct the political system and the infrastructure following war. Inclusion of different stake holders in the political process will create a trust and likelihood for the national dialogue.

The relationship between the parties who will be ultimately deciding the feasibility of addressing the conflict through peaceful, political and dialogue-based means serves as a catalyst for the success and failure of a national dialogue. The bigger the level of political can and elite agreement on the method forward, the bigger the chance of prosperous outcomes and implementation. A country's elite constitutes a relatively exclusive group of powerful political or economic actors and networks. These tend to have a disproportionate amount of political, social, and economic power compared to the rest of the society. Their support for, or resistance to, a national dialogue is the most crucial element prior to and during negotiations as well as in the implementation phase. For instance, there lies an elite intrigue on the question of ownership of Wolkait and Raya between Amhara and Tigray regions of Ethiopia; and this resulted in the rejection of the peace talks. Moreover, OLF (Oromo Liberation Front seems to resist the national dialogue from the inception under the pretense that the representation in the dialogue was uneven.

Organization (ENDO) 6. The Gurage Nationality 7. The Hadiya Nationality 8. The Western Somali Liberation Movement 9. The IFLO 10. Workers representatives 11. The Sidama Liberation Movement 12. The Somali Abo 13. The Afar Liberation Front 14. The Adere's People Representatives 15. The Issa and Gedeburssi People's Movement 16. The Omotic People's Liberation Front 17. The Kambata People's Representatives 18. The Wolaita People's Representative 19. University Teachers' Representatives 20. The Ethiopian Democratic Action Group (EDAG) 21. The Oromo Liberation Front 22. The Oromo Islamic Liberation Front (OILF) 23. The Oromo Peoples Liberation Front (OPLF)

A credible, broadly accepted, independent and respected mediator should facilitate the national dialogue, indicating seriousness and trust in the process. The power and mandates of national dialogues is igniting a skepticism that the incumbent government, if not the prime minister, is deciding alone and this seemingly creates doubtfulness on the likeability of the dialogue. Moreover, existing state institutions like parliaments seem to abuse their decision-making powers in the inception of the dialogue. Thus, consensus-based decision-making has to be complemented by alternative pragmatic mechanisms wherever deadlocks can be broken.

Inclusivity: The debate has focused primarily on the extent to which the composition of the commission and the process towards its establishment will include political opposition groups, including those in active hostilities with the federal government. Some argue that the commission should proceed, with the possibility that opposition groups may join the process at some point in the future. Others propose a sequenced approach, in which a peace process (or at least a ceasefire) is attained to enable the participation of all Ethiopia's political groups (*Ethiopia's National Dialogue Commission: Where Are the Women? | African Arguments*, n.d.).

“A party that caused the problem may be part of the solution, but should never be the leader of the process.”
Balderas Party

(*News: National Dialogue Commission “failed before Formation” - Balderas Party - Addis Standard*, n.d.)

Last but not the list, national dialogues in Ethiopia ought to be rendered at individual, local or community and state level. Individually, psychological intervention through acknowledging dismay and addressing war traumas cum returning the displaced citizens will likely create trust and boost public support. In addition, national dialogues require community level intervention by restoring intimacy among warring regions such as Amhara and Tigray Regions of Ethiopia through civic collective action.¹ At state level, Ethiopia should foster representative institution and genuine political will engulfed with even representation of actors.

5. Conclusion

In the previous chapter, the analysis related to the three objectives have been made and interpreted as the main intention of the paper was to examine the national dialogue components, experiences of successful and failed national dialogues in the world and to pinpoint lessons Ethiopia has to learn. It has only been one time since the adoption of ethnic federalism that Ethiopia endeavored to bring different ethnic groups on a table to discuss.

Thus, the overall conclusions are made apparently by such findings. The peace talk of the 1991 remained impotent to sustain peace among the different people for reasons that range from irreconcilable ethnic demands to unverified history and exclusiveness. Accordingly, the experience of different states teach us that lack of state institution and the political will to transform the people to normality, impotence to establish fact finding bodies and elites rejection of the dialogue due to uneven representation were taken to be the bottlenecks for the success of a national dialogue. The success of national dialogue in Ethiopia seems to rest up on the inclusion of different stake holders in the political process. Eventually, the overemphasis of either nationality or ethnicity may be counterproductive in the national dialogue, accordingly; national elites, the incumbent government, civil society, religious leaders, opposition parties and other stakeholders should be on the table and be talking of their different demands and means of achieving a considerable degree of consensus.

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¹ Civic collective action involves practice consisting in mainly collective initiatives aimed at implementing rights, taking care of common goods or empowering citizens.

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