

Zimbabwe: A Promising National Dialogue Design and Roadblocks

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This brief provides insights on what constitute a national dialogue, why it is necessary, its success potentials, challenges and possible steps towards an inclusive process in Zimbabwe. Towards a step in the right direction, President Emmerson Mnangagwa, on 22 January 2019, called on political parties, churches and civic society leaders to a national dialogue platform. Only political parties were, however, invited to the inaugural dialogue commencement meeting on the 6th of February 2019. Churches have, on the other hand, mooted their own national dialogue process. The dominant purpose of both dialogue initiatives and their mandate remains vague to ordinary citizens and to diverse stakeholders yet the principle of inclusivity underpins successful national dialogues.

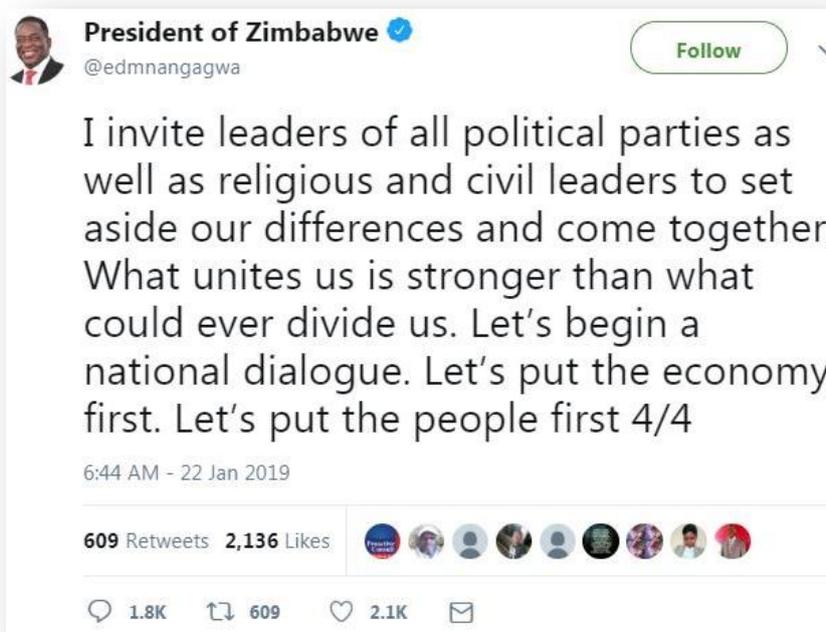
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Introduction

Beyond offensive international diplomatic actions, court applications and protests, a national dialogue appears the best alternative to resolve Zimbabwe’s swelling socio-economic and political afflictions. The country is at crossroads as its political and economic crises deepen. To salvage it from collapse President Emmerson Mnangagwa, on 22 January 2019, called on political parties, churches and civic society leaders to a national dialogue platform. Only political parties were, however, invited to the inaugural dialogue commencement meeting on the 7th of February 2019. Churches have, on the other hand, mooted their own national dialogue process. The dominant purpose of both dialogue initiatives, however, remains vague to ordinary citizens and to diverse stakeholders yet the principle of inclusivity underpins such developments. This brief, therefore, provides insights on what constitute a national dialogue, why it is necessary, its success potentials, challenges and possible steps towards an inclusive process.

The call to dialogue followed an intensified political crisis triggered by fuel price hikes leading to countrywide protests between the 14th and 16th of January 2019. The protests were responded with repression and heavy-handedness by state security agents. The Human Rights NGO Forum

“recorded at least 844 human rights violations during the shutdown. Consolidated statistics so far reveals the following violations: killings (at least 12); injuries from gunshots (at least 78), assault, torture, inhumane and degrading treatment including dog bites (at least 242), destruction of property including vandalism and looting



(at least 46), arbitrary arrests and detentions (466), displacements (under verification).”¹ The ZCTU initiated protests attracted serious state repression when hijacked by criminal elements who took advantage of the protests leading to hundreds of properties being destroyed with industrialists supposedly losing about 300 million dollars² during the protests.

The government’s reaction to the January 2019 protests is analogous to the July 31, 2018 incidences. On July 31, opposition political activists took to the streets in Harare to protest against ‘delayed elections results.’ In an attempt to address the consequences of the protests and shootings, President Mnangagwa established a Commission of Inquiry led by the former President of South Africa, Kgalema Motlanthe. The Motlanthe Commission report states that the deaths of these six people and the injuries sustained by the 35 others arose from the actions of the military and the police,”³ The Commission also notes that “the pre-planned and well-orchestrated as evidenced by the arrival time of the protesters and the material that they brought along which included posters, bricks, stones and containers among others.”

In line with the current call for national dialogue, the August 1, 2018 Commission Inquiry recommended the “establishment of multi-party reconciliation initiatives, including youth representatives, national and international mediators to address the root causes of the post-election violence and to identify the implementing strategies for reducing tensions, promoting common understanding of political campaigning, combating criminality and uplifting communities.” It is within this context that the call for National Dialogue be heeded and considered as an urgent matter for Zimbabwe and for Zimbabweans.

What is National Dialogue

A National Dialogue (ND) is a peacebuilding mechanism used to bring together diverse stakeholders (state and non-state actors) together when political institutions and governance systems are essentially collapsed, delegitimised or when the survival of a government in power is in question.⁴ National Dialogues (sometimes called National Conferences) may also be defined as broad-based, inclusive and participatory negotiation platforms involving large segments of civil society, politicians

¹ Human Rights NGO Forum (18 January 2019) On the Day of Darkness: An Updated Report on the Human Rights Violations Committed Between 14 January 2019 to 05 February 2019. <http://kubatana.net/2019/01/18/days-darkness-zimbabwe/>

² Cabinet sets up team to assess demo damage

³ Mahmoud Tendai (201 December 2018) Motlanthe Commission Issues Verdict. <https://www.dailynews.co.zw/articles/2018/12/20/motlanthe-commission-issues-verdict>. See also: Zimbabwe: Report of Inquiry Into the 1st of August 2018 post-Election Violence.

⁴ IPTI (April 2017) What makes or Breaks National Dialogues. Briefing Note.

and experts. They are ordinarily convened to negotiate major political reforms or peace in complex and fragmented conflict environments.⁵ These dialogues usually happen in contexts where there is high socio-economic and political conflict beyond the containment of traditional security institutions such as the police and military institutions. In practice, national dialogue processes may last for long periods depending on the complexity of issues being addressed and the attitudes of actors involved.

National dialogues are highly contextual and their objectives are customised to the conflict affected country or society. South Sudan as a conflict society, for example, has its 10-points national dialogue objectives namely; (1) ending all forms of violence, (2) redefining and re-establishing stronger national unity, (3) strengthening social contract between the citizens and their state, (4) addressing issues on diversity, (5) agreeing on a mechanism for allocating and sharing resources, (6) settling historical disputes and sources of conflict among communities, (7) setting a stage for an integrated and inclusive national development strategy and economic recovery, (8) agreeing on steps and guarantees to ensure safe, free, fair and peaceful elections and post-transition in 2019 (9) agreeing on a modality for a speedier and safe return of our internally displaced persons and refugees to their homes and (10) furthering national healing, peace, and reconciliation. This means national dialoguing is primarily an instrument for sustainable political transition and peacebuilding, beyond the maintenance of law and order by state security institutions. It is a national healing and reconciliation procedure.

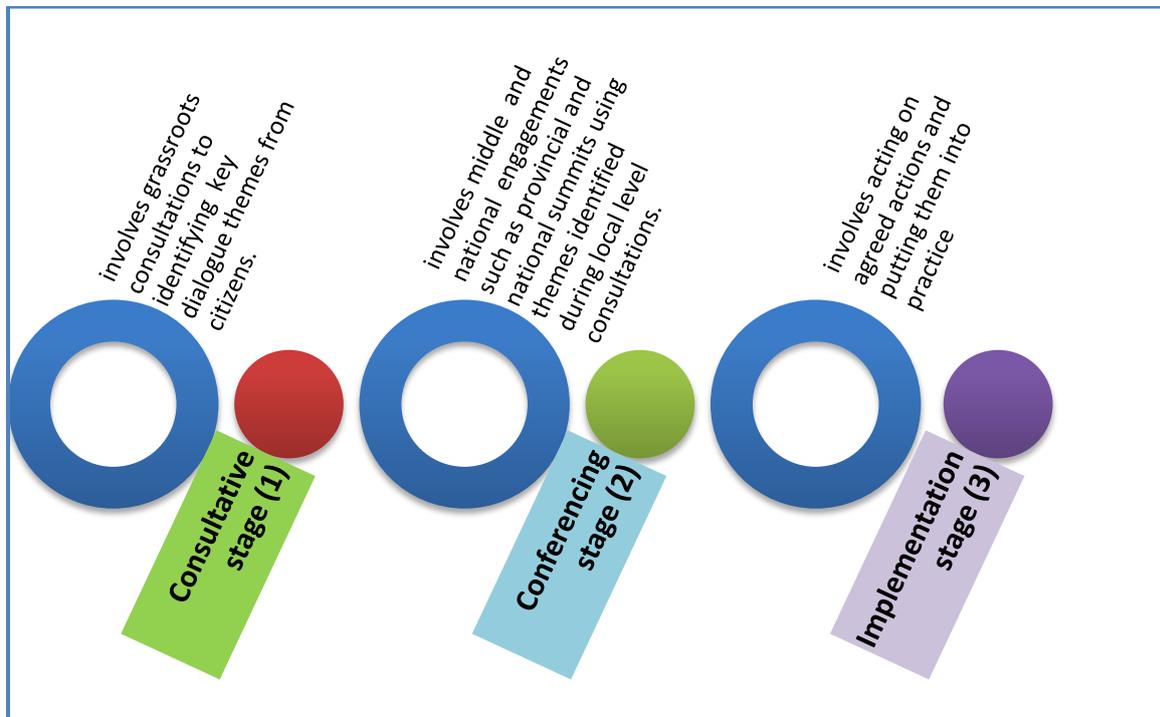
National dialogue objectives are also dependent on whether the dialogue is formal or informal. Informal national dialogues are non-commissioned processes usually commenced by non-state actors such as churches and the civil society while formal dialogues are sanctioned by government mandates and could produce binding resolutions to participating actors. Informal national dialogues, however, usually result in formal processes that could affect political and constitutional reforms. In the current Zimbabwean context, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches has commenced informal national dialogues whereas the President (Emmerson Mnangagwa) has commenced formal national dialogue processes.

National Dialogue Puzzle

National dialogues ideally should involve both local and national stakeholders in order to gain legitimacy and to truly reflect a national character. The process must be inclusive throughout its entire life and participation should involve wider constituencies. Below is an archetypal national

⁵ Paffenholz, T. and Ross, N., 2016. *Inclusive Political Settlements: New Insights from Yemen's National Dialogue*. The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies. Geneva Switzerland.

dialoguing process involving three stages namely; the consultation stage, conferencing stage and the implementation stage.



Consultations- involve gathering local level citizens' views with the objective of identifying key dialoguing issues. This stage assists in setting the agenda for national dialogue. Generally, focus group discussions, and interviews from diverse socio-economic and political groups are carried out as part of the consultation processes. The Zimbabwean National Dialogue missed this stage as both President Mnangagwa and Nelson Chamisa have conceptualised national dialogue within the context of disputed elections and inter-party dialogue. No community level consultations were made to establish a grassroots informed national dialogue framework. Inclusive dialogues (consultations) promote public support and enhance bottom-up buy-in from diverse sectors.

Conferencing -involves middle level engagements such as regional and national level engagements. The conferencing processes are meant to refine issues gathered from grassroots consultations and to develop possible policy options and implementation mechanisms. The Zimbabwean National Dialogue could still meet this stage's expectations although the central ingredient was been obfuscated by political dialoguing without the broader national stakeholders.

Implementation – involves putting into action the agreed actions with political will being the key ingredient. When implementing agreed positions from a national dialogue, it is pertinent to adhere

to implementation mechanisms. This means there should be clear monitoring mechanisms put in place to monitor the national dialogue processes also.

Reflections: Zimbabwe's National Dialogue Design

Zimbabwe's attempts to facilitate a national dialogue have begun with both high hopes and low expectations. Following countrywide protests and their subsequent repression by state security agents led by the country's defence forces, the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission (NPRC) initiated a national dialogue process beginning by meeting diverse stakeholders "to create space for national conversations aimed at achieving social, economic and political transformation." The NPRC's initiative centrally sought to establish a framework for national dialogue. However, the government of Zimbabwe also mooted its own national dialogue initiative beginning with the interparty meeting held on the 6th of February 2019 at the President's Official Residence. The dialogue brought together nearly 22 heads of political parties who contested in the 2018 harmonised elections.



However, Nelson Chamisa the leader of the largest opposition party (MDC-Alliance) snubbed the dialogue citing the inappropriateness of the venue, the legitimacy of President Mnangagwa as the convener and the dialogue's biases towards elections. Among the opposition parties that attended, some labelled their counterparts as cheer leaders walking the government's talk while a few demanded the tabling of various developmental issues including economic turnaround strategies, an end to human rights abuses, electoral reforms and the return to rule of law.

The Churches, through the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC), have also started the national dialogue conversation by creating platforms that shapes the discourse from diverse sectoral and structural angles. The ZCC has already facilitated a broad-based dialogue bringing together political

elites, the civil society, churches and business leaders to start a conversation for nation building. The Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP), on the other hand, also has been making efforts to facilitate a national dialogue. Parallel national dialogue efforts by the Church require harmonisation to harness efficiency, effectiveness and a throbbing impact. However, theirs is an informal national dialogue process which feeds into the government’s national dialogue initiative.



What is peculiar about all the dialogue platforms being conceptualised by the NPRC, the President of Zimbabwe and the Opposition –MDC Alliance seems convoluted. The key stakeholders have different dialoguing starting points, different objectives and agendas. While President Mnangagwa called for a post-election dialogue, the MDC Alliance anticipated a dialogue that includes discussions around the legitimacy of the Presidency, the constitution and the

economic crisis, among other issues. The NPRC on the other hand, commenced its national dialogue with a semi-broad based consultative process aiming at establishing a framework for national dialogue. The NPRC’s initiative seems globally inclusive and holistic process-wise.

“In an effort to come up with a framework for national dialogue, conversations were centred around the following key questions; why are Zimbabweans not talking? What are the key pillars of national dialogue? Who should participate, how and at what level? How should a dialogue process be structured? What does a successful dialogue look like?”⁶

The NPRC’s entry point (above) to the dialogue neither had pre-conditions nor positions as is the case with the ruling party ZANU PF and the MDC Alliance. As such, in view of the above national dialogue reflections, it is contemplative that;

- **Inclusive participation** -the country’s obtaining national dialogue discourse has missed key aspects of national dialoguing which calls for participatory processes that involve grassroots

⁶ The Herald (01 February 2019) NPRC Initiates National Dialogue <https://www.herald.co.zw/nprc-initiates-national-dialogue/>

populations. Public support is central to any successful national dialogue and without it the process may suffer a crisis of legitimacy. Hence, the government may need to formally promote inclusive processes that solicit views from diverse socio-economic and political structures.

- **Scope** -the government's national dialogue facilitation conceptualised the Zimbabwean crises in the context of post-election negotiation rather than a popular national crisis requiring broad-based consultative content. While the government of Zimbabwe called for interparty dialogues based on the 2018 elections conflict, urgent national issues requiring urgent redress include the obtaining economic crisis, unemployment, constitutional reforms and the continuing human rights violations . More broadly, there is lack of clarity on the mandate of the national dialogue designed, hence the need to spell out what this intended dialogue seeks to achieve.
- **Regional and national level consultations** –following local level consultations, regional and national consultation summits should be conducted to solidify the grassroots views towards specific policy directions. However, these are less likely going to take effect given that the dialogues commenced with an electoral political agenda engagements as opposed to a public agenda.
- **Pre-conditions**– Political parties and civic organisations already have lists of positions with legitimacy being the key top agenda issue. It is unthinkable that the parties going to the dialogues have put forward pre-conditions for engaging into a dialogue without giving room to meet and deliberate on what would be primary conditions and key agenda issues.
- **Political will** –the high levels of mistrust among rival political groups could hinder positive political will which affects the implementation of the dialogue resolutions.
- **Facilitators** – the current Zimbabwean government supported national dialogue is being facilitated by the Office of the President and Cabinet. Their convening credibility could be compromised given that the President is a stakeholder to the National Dialogue process. The opposition leaders have already scoffed the notion while demanding mediation by the Southern African Development Community (SADC) or any other respected persons. Facilitators are typically persons with a high degree of political legitimacy within the country or internationally. However, given Zimbabwe's current political context, success rate of the national dialogue depends on President Mnangagwa as the facilitator-participant in the process.

Recommendations: Towards a Promising National Dialogue Design

- **Mandate of the National Dialogue** –national dialogues must have formal mandates. As such, the scope and goal of the national dialogue must be specified and have all Zimbabweans empathetic to its ideals. The national dialogue practices must reflect a 'national character' rather than symptomatic contexts that do not mirror national problems affecting the country. While

the current scope of the national dialogue is confined to post-election processes, a broader socio-economic and political scoping is necessary.

- **Inclusivity** - There is need to develop a true national dialogue framework that begins by involving the grassroots to shape the national discourse. Grassroots consultations can involve countrywide public meetings and think tanking forums where citizens will have an opportunity to air their views about what should constitute national dialogues.
- **Pre-conditions** -All stakeholders, including the ruling party, the opposition parties, churches and civil society members must not engage in the dialogue with antagonistic preconditions which largely affect progressive engagement.
- **Transparency** –the government must establish transparent dialogue platforms and processes with fair representation of different sections of the Zimbabwean societies.
- **Halting continuing human rights violations** – it is of paramount importance for the government to effectively work towards creating an enabling environment that shows sincerity and instil trust among participating stakeholders. As such, halting continuing human rights violations could improve the opposition and non-state actors' propensity to desire participating in the national dialogue process.
- **Defined realistic issues** – it is essential for the national dialogue objectives to be realistic and be determined in a consultative and inclusive manner. This means, there has to be a consensus driven agenda that is manageable, achievable and definable.
- **Women participation** - pursuant to UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, adopted in 2000 it is important to deliberately include women in the national dialogue processes. The inclusion and involvement of women in designing and implementing the national dialogue process enhances a gendered processes
- **Implementation mechanisms** –there is need to develop specific implementation timeframes and monitoring mechanisms. A time-framed dialogue process improves efficiency and effective engagements as well as enhanced resource management.
- **Constitutional mechanisms operationalized:** to complement the national dialogue processes, the judiciary must be seen to execute their duties following the rule of law and upholding constitutionalism