

PEACEBUILDING COMMISSION WORKING GROUP ON LESSONS LEARNED

Concept Note

Lessons Learned from National Dialogue In Post-Conflict Situations

ECOSOC Chamber
14 October 2009, 3 pm – 6 pm

I. Introduction, Objectives & Rationale for the Meeting

The work of the Peacebuilding Commission to date has highlighted the important role “national dialogue” exercises can play in supporting peacebuilding in post-conflict countries. National dialogue and the reconciliation it often seeks to engender, in different forms and applications depending on the country-specific context, constitute essential components for the wider peacebuilding strategies in countries currently on the agenda of the PBC, particularly Burundi, Central African Republic and Guinea Bissau.

Many of the findings of the April 2009 Secretary-General’s Report on Enhancing Mediation and its Support Activities (S/2009/189) can be applied to the design and facilitation of national dialogues. For example, the Report recommended: resolving disputes in a timely manner; engaging the parties early; structuring mediation to address the root causes of conflict; using influence/leverage wisely; strengthening local capacity for conflict prevention/resolution; and resourcing these efforts. Furthermore, the June 2009 Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict (S/2009/304) stressed the need to address the high expectations that follow conflict for “the delivery of concrete political, social and economic dividends,” including by ensuring “effective communication and inclusive dialogue between national authorities and the population.” The Report also identified “support to political processes, including electoral processes, promoting inclusive dialogue and reconciliation, and developing conflict-management capacity at national and sub-national levels” as one of five priority areas in which the international community is frequently requested to assist.

National dialogues have varied remarkably in both scope and application. Some aim to resolve specific rifts or tensions or redirect the public discourse in a more constructive direction. Others seek to build consensus around a new system of governance. Often, as in Liberia, dialogue processes seek a consensual identification of national priorities. However, the principle of national ownership including government and political actors, state institutions and civil society is a precondition for every successful national dialogue. There is also an important potential role for regional and international actors in providing coordinated facilitation and resources in support of the dialogue. Coordinated and well targeted international and regional support for national dialogue is crucial for the recovery of post-conflict countries and to prevent their relapse into conflict.

Existing experience with “national dialogue” points to the following general principles and lessons learned:

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- The design phase of the dialogue, in particular the inclusiveness of the process, is important to its ultimate success.
- National dialogue processes are of a political nature, despite the fact that in some cases the central themes for discussion may not be the political process per se. Those facilitating dialogue processes should understand power dynamics, and take these into account.
- National ownership is essential: a dialogue must be wanted, driven and supported by national stakeholders, major groups and communities.
- Dialogue requires that basic conditions be present first. Participants must feel free to speak their minds without fear of retribution.
- Dialogue processes should allow for transparency, to help build trust and create a feeling of inclusiveness and accountability.
- Dialogue processes can fail if not supported by negotiation and facilitation expertise, as well as sufficient and predictable administrative and budgetary support.
- Dialogue processes may evolve into standing mechanisms to facilitate the ongoing and future management of tensions and conflict.
- The visibility of international support has at times been a powerful force to advance the dialogue process, and in other instances has created the sense of external imposition.
- A strong follow-up mechanism to the process is essential to ensure effective changes towards lasting peace.

Challenges identified include:

- The trend of UN presences towards having support to some form of “national dialogue” exercise as part of their mandate in post-conflict countries, regardless of demand
- The lack of a shared understanding of what constitutes “national dialogue” and the proliferation of ill-defined concepts relating to this
- The lack of clear linkages between national dialogue and other UN-supported processes such as conflict-prevention, peacebuilding and mediation
- The apparent lack of shared guidance on options available to prepare, conduct and ensure appropriate follow up on national dialogues.
- The lack of shared guidance across the UN system and international community on how to organize effective and well targeted international support for these exercises
- The wealth of experience among member states and also within the UN (notably at senior leadership level) from which to draw on to develop shared lessons and guidance for future engagement.

II. Approaches to national dialogue in selected case studies

Country cases for consideration during this WGLL:

Guatemala, Burundi, Niger, Haiti

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Objective of the case studies:

Drawing on the experience of national experts with direct experience in the facilitation of comprehensive national dialogue processes, this meeting of the Working Group will examine the contribution of “national dialogue” to confidence-building among national actors and as a means to forge national consensus on key political, economic and social measures in support of the peacebuilding process. The Working Group will also seek to extract from these case studies the valuable lessons about international support to “national dialogue” to inform international engagement in supporting such processes in other post-conflict countries.

III. Key issues for consideration

National level:

- What lessons can be learnt from experience with “national dialogue” in various post-conflict situations? What are the key success factors?
- What must be done to improve the initiatives with a view to better addressing the special needs of vulnerable groups? How can a connection be made between elites (civil society and political) and the population at large, in order to ensure that grassroots issues are discussed at the political level?
- Which efforts were most successful/ less successful in coordinating the engagement of different actors?

The role of regional and international partners:

- What kind of regional/international involvement/facilitation proved to be useful in what kind of situations?
- What lessons (good and not as good) can be learnt from external assistance to/(?) facilitation of “national dialogue” and how have they contributed to strengthening national ownership of the process?
- What are the necessary pre-conditions for initiating a successful national dialogue? Is there a case to be made that in some fragile post-conflict situations - characterized by weak institutions and limited capacity to deliver on demands - it may be too early to constructively initiate national dialogue? For post conflict countries, what is the optimal timing/what are the necessary pre-conditions for the international community to engage in a strategic dialogue with Government and the national stakeholders?
- How can the international community help to realistically manage expectations from the outset?
- How can a strong follow-up mechanism to national dialogue processes be best facilitated by international actors?
- How can the UN (including PBC and PBF) best support national political dialogue, convening a strategic platform for different stakeholders, as part of the peacebuilding process? To what extent can the Peacebuilding Strategic Framework provide space for dialogue between the Government and national stakeholders on the one hand and international partners on the other?

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IV. Format and Structure

This open meeting will be held from 03:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. on Wednesday, 14 October 2009.

Chair:

Ambassador Park In-kook, Vice-Chair of the PBC and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations

Panelists:

Mrs. Mariama Gamatié, former Minister of Communication and Culture, Niger
(Burundi, Niger)

Mr. Garaudy Laguerre, former director of the Institute for Advanced Social and Political Studies, Haiti (ISPOS) and attorney at law (Haiti)

Mr. Bernardo Arevalo de Leon, UN/ Interpeace Joint Program (Guatemala)

Outcome

Following the meeting, the PBSO will prepare a Chair's Summary of relevant lessons drawn from the presentations and discussions. The document will be distributed to the PBC Chair and the chairs of the various country specific configurations.