National Dialogue in Ethiopia

Towards Sustainable Peace and Democratic Transition

Abdulqadir Adem (PhD)

Paper presented for a conference to launch a national dialogue in Ethiopia

August, 2020, Addis Ababa

First Draft

1 Background 1
2 National dialogue: Conceptual framework. 2
3 Methodology 4
4 Contexts in which National Dialogues Evolve 4
5 Framework of a National Dialogue 5
5.1 Phases of a national Dialogue 5
5.2 Objective and Scope: Mandate and agenda 6
5.3 Number of participants: Inclusiveness 7
5.4 Duration of national Dialogue 8
5.5 Decision making 8
5.6 National dialogue Facilitators 8
5.7 Logistics and finance 9
5.8 Actors Participating in National Dialogues 9
6 What makes or breaks a national dialogue 9
7 National dialogue viz-a-vie other a conflict transformation mechanism 11
Mediation and negotiation 11
8 Why National Dialogue in Ethiopia? 11
8.1 Objectives of the national dialogue 13
8.2 Expected outcomes 13
8.3 Potential Participants of the proposed National Dialogue 14
8.4 Major working groups 14
8.5 The 6th Ethiopian General Election and National Dialogue 15
9 International experience 15
10 Conclusion and Recommendations 16
Reference 18

Abstract

In Ethiopia perceptions of historical injustice, exclusion and marginalization, Inequitable distribution of power and resources, poverty and other socio-economic and political injustice created tense political, cultural and economic environment. No serious and genuine attempt ever made to resolve these discontents in a comprehensive and all inclusive manner.

National Dialogues have been used as a critical tool to settle political crises and lay the foundation for sustainable peace and smooth political transitions. National Dialogues help to avoid potential political deadlocks, put off distractive conflict scenarios, or disruptive political transitions. Given Ethiopia's historic and current deep rooted political and cultural tensions, national dialogues is highly believed to offer the potential for meaningful conversation about the underlying drivers of conflict and ways to holistically address these issues.

This paper aims to offer a brief overview and the imperatives for launching a national dialogue in Ethiopia. It through light on the analytical framework of a national dialogue, explains common features and characteristics of National Dialogues, explores the various political and procedural factors as well as conditions that enable or constrained national dialogues successful. The paper used a desktop review of important literatures on principles, practices and international experience on national dialogue.

1 Background

Ethiopia's political history is shaped by prolonged conflicts and tensions between forces of diverse socio-economic and political ideology and orientation. Political agendas ranging from the very foundation of the nation building process to the constitution, state-society relation, federalism, party system etc served as contentious issues. The Ethiopian political debate was fully occupied by the 'Centripetal' and 'Centrifugal' political forces to date. Forces struggling for ethnic and cultural freedom and equality revolted against the 'centralist' Ethiopian state starting the first half of the 20th century. The Imperial regime, the *Dergue* and the EPRDF contributed, in different scale, in aggravating political tensions in the country.

In the last almost three decades the TPLF/EPRDF regime exacerbated the already simmering political and cultural antagonism. The federal experiment which was believed to serve as an instrument to resolve the age old identity politics ushered and further stiffened ethnic relations and hence fueled identity politics. The ruling EPRDF coalitions systematically manipulated the federal setup to consolidate power and resources at the cost of escalating tensions.

A relative stability and glimpse of hope sparked after the coming in to power of Dr. Abiy Ahmed, as PM of Ethiopia. Many promising reforms were taken by the new administration which, among others, widened the political space and better media freedoms. Political leaders, activities, media professionals, community leaders were freed. Successive legislative reforms took place which changed the draconian laws of the EPRDF including the civic organizations, media, political parties etc. The political reform initiatives were applauded by local and international observers.

The country observed a relative peace and stability, after more than two decades of brutality and dictatorship. But that didn't last long.

Conflicts and tensions started to erupt in different parts of the country. Political assassinations, ethnic strife, migration became common phenomena. Postponement of the 6th Ethiopian general election which was expected to be held in August, 2020, further escalated tensions between the ruling party and opposition groups. Despite the reform measures taken by the government, the political crisis in Ethiopia is getting worse. Tensions between the central government and regional states, and horizontally among the regional states on issues pertaining border is getting wild. Many fear that the ever mounting political tensions, corroborated by high rate of youth unemployment, could derail the delicate transition.

Many believe that the only way to resolve historic and present-day challenges in Ethiopia is engage in a comprehensive, genuine and inclusive National Dialogue and discuss all contending political, economic and cultural issues. Calls for a national dialogue are mounting from every corner including political parties, political pundit, civic organizations, academia and the public. Regional and international organizations are also calling for a National Dialogue to break the political deadlock in Ethiopia.

Despite widespread appreciation for a National Dialogue, in Ethiopia, few comprehend the conceptual and procedural framework of a National Dialogue. This paper, hence, attempts to shade light on the imperative for National Dialogue in Ethiopia as well as the characteristics of a successful National Dialogue. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to help better design the national dialogue process in Ethiopia. The paper specifically seek to enhance political dialogue and reconciliation, with a vision to narrow gaps on contending narrations in the national building process and craft a new social contract in Ethiopia.

2 National dialogue: Conceptual framework.

Blunck et al defined National Dialogue as "nationally owned political processes aimed at generating consensus among a broad range of national stakeholders in times of deep political crisis, in post-war situations or during far-reaching political transitions" (Blunck et al., 2017, p. 21). A National Dialogue is an increasingly popular tool for conflict resolution and managing political transformation. It can broaden debate regarding a country's trajectory beyond the usual elite decision makers. It is one of the tools used to build consensus among contending political forces to resolve major political differences and avoid violent conflict. National Dialogues have been used as an instrument to resolve political crises and pave the way for political transitions and sustainable peace (Paffenholz et al., 2017, p. 8).

National Dialogues are conceived to be better conflict resolution instruments used in response to crisis of overarching national importance and launched in times of political transition when old

institutions are delegitimized and a new social contract between state and society is needed (Blunck et al., 2017). In the short term, and most notably in cases of mass protests, National Dialogues have been able to minimize violence by transferring grievances from the streets into formalized processes (Ibid. 8).

National Dialogues are mainly accompanied by broader societal consultations, involving all sectors of society. Their objective can involve broad-based change processes, like negotiating a new social contract or more narrow objectives. According to Stigant and Murray national dialogue can broaden debate regarding a country's trajectory beyond the usual elite decision makers (Stigant & Murray, 2015).

Unlike exclusive elite negotiations, National dialogues are characterized by their intention to broaden participation which provide access for parties and groups usually excluded from or under-represented in political negotiations, and thereby air demands which could otherwise fuel future discontent if they are not addressed (Harlander, 2016). Consequently, religious, ethnic or tribal minorities, civil society, businesses, labour unions, women or youth are usually interested in such processes, as they see in national dialogues an opportunity to lobby for their interests. This makes national dialogues a popular tool for structural reforms (Ibid, 6).

National Dialogues emerged in response to the desire to protect national sovereignty as well as to skepticism about internationally directed interventions in many parts of the world which shifted the onus of conflict resolution from the international to the national (Blunck, Vimalarajah, Wils, Burg, Lanz, & Mubashir, 2017, p. 18).

National dialogues are usually summoned when the very foundations or survival of a government came under threat and are meant to resolve political crises, improve the legitimacy of institutions, and lead countries into political transitions (Harlander, 2016; Paffenholz et al., 2017). National dialogues will have a higher likelihood of success if they incorporate the following principles: inclusion, transparency and public participation, a far-reaching agenda, a credible convener, appropriate and clear rules of procedure, and an implementation plan. Moreover Critical analysis of the necessary conditions is needed for a successful national dialogue.

The political context in which a national dialogue takes place can affect the likelihood of success or failure. Key factors include political will, Links to other transitional processes, common ground among parties, public support, learning from past experience, the role of external actors and national ownership (Haider, 2019).

Types and Objectives of National Dialogues

National Dialogues can be used to fulfill a range of objectives. They may focus on a more narrow set of specific or substantive objectives or on broad based change processes, which may entail

building a new political system and developing a new social contract (Blunck, Vimalarajah, Wils, Burg, Lanz, & Mubashir, 2017). Blunck et al identified two main types of national dialogues, identified according to the function they seek to fulfill (ibid, 21). These are National Dialogues as mechanisms for crisis prevention and management and National Dialogues as mechanisms for fundamental change.

The first type is a shorter-term endeavor, undertaken strategically as a means to resolve or prevent the outbreak of armed violence. Such type of national dialogue aims to break political deadlock and re-institute political understanding among political actors (Blunck, Vimalarajah, Wils, Burg, Lanz, & Mubashir, 2017). Such a national negotiation has limited mandates, smaller size and shorter duration. Tunisia is good example in this type of national dialogue (ibid, 22).

The second type in which national dialogue is used as an instrument for fundamental change envisages redefining state-society relations and developing new social contract, with eventual goal to introduce fundamental institutional changes. Such an initiative has broader mandate, reasonably diverse participants.

Depending on the peculiar circumstances of a country national dialogues should be designed to realize immediate and/or far reaching outcomes; managing crises or reframe state-society relations. They should not, however, be conducted as a tool to calm mounting political pressures or appease local stakeholders and international partners (Yohannes & Dessu, 2020, p. 18).

3 Methodology

This research is initiated after a preliminary discussion with PM Dr. Abiy Ahmed of Ethiopia on the need to launch a national dialogue in Ethiopia that would help to resolve the many faceted political and socio-economic predicaments that the country is facing and also ease the Ethiopian political transition that is passing through difficult and tense political and security challenges.

The research is based on review of literature both theoretical and practical. Accordingly, a systematic review of major resources designed to guide national dialogue processes in Africa and other parts of the world. Materials on the conceptual and/or theoretical aspects of national dialogue have also been reviewed. Discussions with different stakeholders, civil society representatives, community leaders, religious organizations and academia also been made. Nonetheless, due to time and resource limitations samples taken for the researches are very much limited.

4 Contexts in which National Dialogues Evolve

Political context

Many national dialogue initiatives were taken in a political environment characterized by popular uprising, war or armed conflicts, and/or exclusive elite negotiation to end violence (Paffenholz, Zachariassen, & Helfer, 2017). Popular discontent with the incumbent governments manifested itself in large numbers of people demonstrating and advocating for change usually on the street. Governments launch national dialogues in response to such popular demands. Often demands

for political reforms and democratization and subsequent government responses by initiating a National Dialogue was influenced by international and regional trends. The uprising in Tunisia and subsequent mass protest in the MENA region best demonstrates this fact (ibid, 23). Similarly war and armed conflict and exclusive elite deal promoted national dialogue in many countries.

Who can initiate National Dialogues and why?

According to Paffenholz and et al opposition parties, government, civic organizations have advocated for the initiation of a National Dialogue, and did so for a variety of reasons. Generally national dialogues were a response to mounting domestic pressures and usually erupt in the context of political crisis. This was especially true when issues of fundamental national concern arose or the survival of a ruling government was in question (Ibid, 24). In many cases governments take the initiative for national dialogue as a strategy to regain legitimacy in times of crisis.

Opposition parties often call for dialogue in order to redefine and redesign the structure of the government and bring about partial or broad based changes. Both government and opposition forces agree on national dialogue as a negotiation instrument. At times non state actors including civil society groups take the initiative in favor of change or maintaining the statuesque.

5 Framework of a National Dialogue

5.1 Phases of a national Dialogue

Preparation phase

National dialogues pass through three successive phases: preparation, process and implementation (Haider, 2019). The preparation phase of the national dialogue is very crucial and critically shapes the next phases. Hence sufficient time, sometimes longer than the process, need to be allocated. At least major parameters of the dialogue need to be agreed upon in this phase. The common parameters include mandate of the national dialogue, agenda, participant selection, convener, decision-making procedures, etc.

The preparation phase should distinctly set out the institutions and mechanisms needed to lay the groundwork for a smooth and successful National Dialogue. This is also the phase where potential pitfalls and challenges are anticipated and system designed to resolve as and when happened (Blunck et al., 2017). It must be understood that the preparation phase constitutes a mini-negotiation process. Preparation phase is essentially a political bargaining process. It needs an institutional infrastructure dedicated for this purpose.

A consensus on core objectives of the dialogue need to be reach during the preparation phase, which may include, but not limited to, avoiding violent conflict, rebuilding state-society relationships, reconstructing the political system etc. having clear objectives will determine the

structure of the dialogue, the process and the outcome. Building confidence and technical capacity are key elements in the preparation phase.

According to Blunck et al within each phase different functions need to be developed into an institutional set-up. However, caution is needed to realize the fact that there is no such thing as the one-size-fits-all or 'correct' format (ibid). Every national dialogue is unique and need to be designed based on a thorough analysis of local circumstances and the specific objective of the national dialogue process. The preparation of a national dialogue process can often be lengthy and is central to its success (Papagianni, 2014).

The process phase

Once the key parameters are established the process phase will start, which is the most public phase of the national dialogue (Haider, 2019). It is the formal national dialogue phase and covers major aspects related to implementing issues like including agenda-setting, determining a convener, establishing principles, producing decision-making modalities, selecting participants, ensuring public consultation and outreach, establishing effective support structures and thinking about timing and sequencing (Blunck et al, 2017).

Implementation phase

The implementation phase is dedicated to executing the decisions taken during the negotiations. The implementation of a national dialogue's recommendations or decisions represents the final challenge for parties and facilitators and should be planned carefully during and after the dialogue (Harlander, 2016). Depending on the objective and mandate of the National Dialogue, planning for implementation happens during the process phase or even as early as the preparation phase (Blunck et al., 2017).

In summary, procedures for preparing, conducting, and implementing National Dialogues have played a decisive role in whether processes are perceived as representative and legitimate (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

5.2 Objective and Scope: Mandate and agenda

The mandate of a national dialogue defines its prerogatives and overall objectives (Harlander, 2016). They are organized to help solve critical social, political, or economic issues of major national concern. According to Paffenholz and et al National dialogues will at least have one or more of the following mandates;

- Political reform aiming to improve the current political system and initiate democratization.
- Peacemaking aiming to end violence, prevent further escalation of armed conflict, ease mounting tensions, and foster a culture of dialogue to establish lasting peace.
- Constitution-making aiming to inform the process of drafting or amending a constitution.

Each potential party to a national dialogue has a strong interest in influencing the drafting of the mandate as it will determine what can be discussed and decided upon during the dialogue.

Consultations are essential to meet the expectations of the main stakeholders (Harlander, 2016). It can be challenging to strike a balance between the breadth of the mandate, efficiency and independence. It is important to avoid overburdening the process (Blunck et al., 2017). It is recommended to have a narrower, more manageable mandate to make the process efficient and avoid complications (Papagianni, 2014). On the other hand extremely narrow mandate might greatly limit the room for change and may contribute to the persistence of an elite-led process (Harlander, 2016). Hence balance should be maintained in drafting a national dialogue mandate.

Agenda setting

Similar to setting a mandate for the national dialogue, a key consideration for agenda-setting is to avoid overburdening agendas. Rather agenda items should be feasible and doable in the limited time frame (Blunck, Vimalarajah, Wils, Burg, Lanz, & Mubashir, 2017). This can allow for greater focus, follow-through and success within the national dialogue.

It can also be useful to sequence agenda items such that the process begins with "soft topics". This can allow for participants to see that there are commonalities and can help to build confidence and trust, forming a foundation for further success (Blunck, Vimalarajah, Wils, Burg, Lanz, & Mubashir, 2017) At the same time, it is essential that "hot topics" are not ignored and that they are given sufficient space and time to be discussed in detail and to develop a roadmap on how to address those issues. In some national dialogues, the process was rushed through without adequate time to discuss and agree on the contested items (Ibid). Agenda items also need to reflect the concerns of the general public.

5.3 Number of participants: Inclusiveness

The vast majority of literature emphasizes that the transformative potential of national dialogues can only be realized if they are genuinely inclusive of society. In order to be truly inclusive, it is necessary to help balance power asymmetries and ensure actual decision-making power. Highly inclusive and participatory national dialogues may render discussions unwieldy, however, and make it difficult to resolve key political questions. The success of national dialogues can depend in large part on finding the right equilibrium between efficiency and inclusiveness (Haider, 2019) .

Process vs outcome inclusivity

Inclusivity can be categorized as process and outcome inclusivity. 'Process inclusivity' relates to the level of societal and political representation both in the preparatory and actual dialogue phases. Whereas 'outcome inclusivity' refers to the level of inclusiveness created by the national dialogue's outputs in the implementation phase (Planta et al., 2015). The degree of inclusiveness, and extent to which different political actors and segments of society are included, shapes significantly whether stakeholders view the national dialogue as a valid way in which to address their grievances and aspirations (Blunck et al., 2017).

The selection of delegates encompasses two dimensions: criteria and procedure. Selection criteria define which groups will be included in the National Dialogue, whereas selection procedures refer to how individuals are actually chosen. The selection process is a crucial issue, because it determines the dynamics, legitimacy, and outcomes of the Dialogue. The selection criteria could include the following, socio-demographic factors, organizational membership, merit and reputation, strategic or pragmatic considerations and a mix of the above (Paffenholz et al., 2017)

5.4 Duration of national Dialogue

The length of a National Dialogue depends on its mandate, the dynamics of the negotiation process, the political context which may be conducive or obstructive to an effective outcome, and sometimes the available resources (Paffenholz et al., 2017). National Dialogues can last less than a week like in Egypt; between a week and a month as in Afghanistan (CLJ), Benin, Mali; between a month and a year as in Somalia (Djibouti), Somaliland, South Africa (both Dialogues), and Togo (both Dialogues); or even years as in the DRC, Nepal, and Somalia (Eldoret/Mbagathi).

The whole national dialogue process will take one year, which includes post-election activities. The preparation phase will take maximum of two months. The national dialogue will take at least eight months. One to two months will be allocated to evaluate the process, document lessons learned and design system to institutionalize the findings and outcomes of the national dialogue.

Funding and time pressure, the urgency of halting violence and delivering quantifiable results, and the need to forestall spoilers or avoid a political vacuum are some considerations that tend towards having a shorter duration (Blunck et al., 2017).

5.5 Decision making

Transparent decision-making rules are an important feature of National Dialogues. Decision-making procedures can enable or constrain the ability of national dialogues to reach an agreement and implement it (Paffenholz et al., 2017). Decision-making rules, if carelessly drafted, could result in locking a dialogue in lengthy debates, or in vetoes or boycotts due to the frustration of some participants (Harlander, 2016). Similarly to the selection of participants, decision-making rules should be made transparent (Blunck et al., 2017).

5.6 National dialogue Facilitators

National Dialogues are often formally facilitated or mediated by an individual or a group who can significantly shape the process and the outcome. Such roles can be filled by insiders from the country, including stakeholders participating in the National Dialogue, as well as by outsiders, which may include regional or international stakeholders. Most of the time, an actor perceived as impartial undertakes the facilitation role (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

5.7 Logistics and finance

National dialogue need well prepared financial plan and logistical support. Funding covering the costs of a National Dialogue, from the venue and transport to the support structures and experts, can be provided either by the government, foreign states, regional organizations UN agencies, local or international NGOs, or a combination of the above.

5.8 Actors Participating in National Dialogues

Specific actors participating to any national dialogue depends on the local context. In many cases the following are the major actors; Government, Political parties, Civic organizations, religious groups, women and youth representatives, business groups and regional actors (Paffenholz et al., 2017).

6 What makes or breaks a national dialogue

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. The following **political context factors** play a decisive role in influencing the outcomes of National Dialogues (Paffenholz et al. , 2017; Haider, 2019)

- **Political will:** the greater the level of political will and elite agreement on the way forward, the greater the likelihood of successful outcomes and implementation.
- **National elites' resistance or support.** The attitude and behavior of national elites—understood as groups in society who have a disproportionate amount of political, social, and economic power compared to the rest of the society—was found to be the single most important factor influencing the chances of National Dialogues to reach and implement agreements.
- **Links to other transitional processes:** national dialogues need to be embedded in larger change processes in order to promote real structural change. If disconnected to other political processes they are likely to be counter-productive.
- **Common ground among parties:** the absence of diametrically opposed political camps can make it more likely to arrive at a common view or shared objectives in dialogue, allowing for the process to move forward. In contrast, drastically different views can exacerbate distrust and stall the process.
- **Public support:** public support or lack thereof can enable or constrain progress in the national dialogue process. The degree of buy-in is influenced by the availability of public information, good communication, and media engagement – all of which affect the level of transparency and understanding of the process.

- Learning from past experience: national dialogues have benefitted from dialogue expertise and learning from past national dialogues.
- Existing culture of dialogue. National Dialogues have benefitted, both in the pre-negotiation and the negotiation phases, from existing dialogue expertise in a country, such as experiences with local-level mediation. Experienced local facilitators have worked inside or outside of National Dialogues to bring parties together to a position of consensus.
- The role of external actors and national ownership: support (e.g. political, financial and technical support) or resistance of external actors can influence the degree of success of national dialogues. It is important to strike a balance between external support and national ownership. The latter can increase the likelihood of public buy-in, perceptions of legitimacy – and chances of implementation.

In addition to the above mentioned political factors, there are equally important process factors that can determine the whole process of a national dialogue (Paffenholz et al, 2017; Haider, 2019).

- Representation, number, and selection of actors. 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. In some cases, selection procedures were coopted by elites, who selected the participants most loyal to them to participate in a National Dialogue.

- Confidence-building measures: national dialogues must be accompanied by a series of steps to attenuate tensions, in order to establish a level of "working trust" to engage in a meaningful dialogue. Trust-building is important throughout all phases in order to ensure that agreements are also implemented.

- 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, final decisions are taken by consensus. However, decision-making practices can diverge from formal procedures, most commonly when elites take decisions outside the plenary, excluding other participants as a result.

- Choice of mediators and facilitators. National Dialogues are almost always facilitated by a neutral party to the negotiations. Facilitators are typically people 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.

- **Support structures for involved actors.** Support structures established by international, regional, or non-governmental organizations aimed to strengthen 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 material, 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.

- **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 sometimes came together to negotiate as a unified cluster out of concern for a specific issue or strategic interest.

- **Provision for implementation:** it is necessary to ensure that sufficient funds for implementation, expertise and accountability mechanisms are in place, such that key actors may feel bound by what has been agreed. Transitional bodies and/or new institutions are often set up to implement the outcomes.

7 National dialogue viz-a-vie other a conflict transformation mechanism

Mediation and negotiation

National Dialogues are only one way to address political crises and violent conflicts and guide change processes, alongside other mechanisms for conflict transformation, such as **mediation and negotiation**. The demarcating features of National Dialogues are its process orientation, instead of outcome, its level and span of participation connecting different layers of society, and its national organization and facilitation, external actors focusing only on support functions.

In practice, nonetheless, any sustainable solution is likely to require a combination of context-specific methods and processes. A National Dialogue process can in practice move through a mediated preparation phase and fall back on heavy negotiations during key political moments. Moreover, it can take place before, after or in parallel to a negotiated or mediated process (Berghof Foundation, 2017).

8 Why National Dialogue in Ethiopia?

Ethiopia's current political field is highly polarized and fragmented. Animosity between political groups and even political parties seems rampant. Political tolerance is reached historic low level.

At the community level ethnic and religious tensions are very high. Many clashes with ethnic and/or religious causes erupted especially in the last two years, which claimed the lives of many citizens. The last two years witnessed displacement of millions of citizens and death of large number of citizens in different regions due to conflicts triggered by ethnic or religious identity.

From historical perspective, the evolution of the Ethiopian state was marked by the interaction of ethnic, regional and religious factors that at times acted in harmony and at other times in conflict (Berhe A., 2008). In Ethiopia State-society relations have been characterized by contention, contradiction and domination (Bekele et al., 2016). A long history of authoritarian and dictatorship has created political and social tensions in Ethiopia. Accumulated social, economic and political injustice by the regimes from the first half of the 20th century created inequalities which lead to costly civil war and released a 'conflict spiral' based, mainly, on identity.

A full-fledged authoritarian regime which ruled the country for nearly three decades exacerbated the already volatile political tensions in the country. Violation of human and democratic rights, corruption, abuse of power, electoral fraud etc created civil disobedience and widespread protest forced the regime to introduce some changes. Poverty, the inequitable distribution of resources, perceptions of historical injustice and exclusion constitutes the underlying causes of social tensions in different countries (Annan, 2010). This is very much true for Ethiopia.

Different kind of cultural, economic and political contradictions in Ethiopia, which is also, in a way, similar to many African countries contributed to Ethiopia's historical and present tensions (Mubangizi, 2018). These tension between tradition and modernity, centrifugal and centripetal political and economic forces, tension between the sacred and the secular, increasing gap between rich and poor, quest for home-grown solutions while heavily relying on foreign aid, FDI and imported goods and services (Ibid).

Despite a serious of reforms being undertaken by the incumbent government, the nation is full of unresolved political agendas, with huge potential for fatal conflict. Postponement of the country's general election due to Covid 19 pandemic, supposed to be held in August this year, has exacerbated an already complex political transition. Many are expressing concern that going for election amid unresolved and delicate political agendas could slip the country into a dangerous political crisis. Hostility among the leaders of Ethiopia's most powerful regions has soared during the two years (International Crisis Group, 2019).

The current political quagmire in Ethiopia is rooted in multidimensional crises which call for dialogue involving a range of stakeholders in order to address the multi-dimensional causes of conflict (Blunck at al., 2017). A well designed national dialogue is imperative for managing political transitions and building sustainable peace in Ethiopia. The highly volatile and tense

political transition that the country is in during the last two years, created serious concern among politicians and other stakeholders about the country's political future. Unless a national dialogue is made among all political stakeholders, the nation could end up in a political deadlock (FEP, 2020).

8.1 Objectives of the national dialogue

National dialogue in Ethiopia is needed to deal with both narrow as well as broad based political predicaments. The narrow objectives could include issues like identity politics, constitutional amendment, the federal experiment, security arrangements, emerging political violence and instability etc. while broad-based objectives may include building a new political system and developing a new social contract. The proposed national dialogue in Ethiopia could have the following short term and long term objectives.

Short term objectives;

- Achieve sustainable peace and stability
- Building trust among political parties and other stakeholders of the Ethiopian politics.
- Make upcoming general election smooth, peaceful, legitimate, effective and efficient.
- Draw a road map of the Ethiopia's political process.
- Lay the foundation for the election get legitimacy by the voters, observers and contending political parties.
- Build the capacity of political parties

Long term objectives

- Negotiating a new social contract at national and regional levels
- Redefining state-society relations that will lead to a new level of democratic system
- Establishing new political institutions and establishing better security arrangements
- Determining the process through which reforms will take place.
- Facilitate constitutional amendments.

8.2 Expected outcomes

Experience shows that measuring the outcomes of a national dialogue are often intangible and difficult to measure. However, in the planned national dialogue, the following outcomes could be taken as success factors;

- Peaceful general election with no or minimum human and material cost.
- Wider political space in terms of access to media, resources and public institutions by all political parties.
- Strengthening the culture of democracy, dialogue, freedom of expression, tolerance.
- Breaking of political taboos.

- Developing the culture of political inclusion and representation of marginalized groups in the mainstream Ethiopian politics.

In addition to the above formal and tangible expected outcomes, national dialogues sometimes bring about a positive effect and intangible outcomes for the political life of the countries. These include 'strengthening a culture of debate and free speech; breaking taboos; entrenchment of certain norms of inclusion and representation of marginalised groups and the ability to keep all the political actors inside the political process.' (Yohannes & Dessu, 2020)

8.3 Potential Participants of the proposed National Dialogue

The final list of participants of the dialogue will be worked by the facilitators. However, the following list includes the major actors in national dialogues, considering the experience of other countries.

1. Registered political parties: Both national and regional
2. Civic Society Organizations,
3. Academic and policy research institutions,
4. Religious and Community Based Institutions (CBOs),
5. women and youth association,
6. Trade unions,
7. Media and activists
8. Community leaders are another group of participants in the process.
9. Representatives of Ethiopian diaspora.

8.4 Major working groups

The objectives, the composition of the participants, the mandate and agendas of the national dialogue will ultimately determine the working groups and other arrangements. The following working groups of the national dialogue can be consider,

Political working group. It will have the following sub working groups

Election 2020 working group
Constitutional amendment working group
Federalism, good governance and democracy working group
National consensus working group
Media working group

Economic and social issues working group

Development and equitable distribution of resource
Economic and social infrastructure

8.5 The 6th Ethiopian General Election and National Dialogue

Ethiopia was expected to hold general election this year. Since the beginning of the reform in April, 2018 the election was one of the highly contested political agenda. Especially political were highly divided on the timing and procedure of the election. The Ethiopian Political Parties Joint Council (EPPJC) an umbrella of all formally registered political parties in Ethiopia, decided, in a majority vote for the postponement of the election, with few including the ruling party, voted to conduct the election on time. Finally with the eruption of the Corona epidemic, the election was postponed.

In its political history the country has never experienced a free and fair election. The six Ethiopian general election highly polarized public opinions, mostly in line with the position of the political parties. Citizens, local and international observers are expressing their fear that with the current political tension, luck of thrust between political forces and the state, antagonistic political rhetoric and other socio-economic challenges, the election could drive the country in to chaos.

To make the election successful and minimize the risks and concerns related with the election, sufficient preparations at all levels are needed. One of the most important pre-election political tasks, many believe, needed is to conduct national dialogue among political parties and other stakeholders including CSOs, media, activists, academic community.

Election is one of the critical political events which determines the fate of a nation. Successful elections require a careful design and execution of the full election cycle, which includes pre and post-election activities. Any irregularities in the election cycle will seriously damage the election process and negatively affects the legitimacy of the election result. Hence, in order to make the election process smooth, build trust among political parties and other stakeholders of the election, minimize tensions among voters, create conducive environment for peaceful election campaign, a National Dialogue should be lunched.

With this background, an inclusive national dialogue is considered a must to lay the foundation for the upcoming election and to create a conducive environment to sustainable peace in the long term. A national dialogue is sought vital to lower the extremely tight political tensions, build consensus among political forces, and resolve some of the major contending political issues.

9 International experience

National dialogue processes have taken place in a number of countries going through political transitions and have influenced the outcomes of these transitions. Several West African countries held national conferences in the early 1990s as they moved from authoritarian to democratic governments (Benin, Togo, Congo Brazzaville, Niger, Mali and Zaire, among others). Following the 2003 Bonn Agreement, the Emergency and Constitutional Loya Jirgas were held in Afghanistan and contributed to the design of the transitional process.

Finally, the National Dialogue Conference was launched in Yemen in March 2013 as part of the November 2011 Implementation Mechanism of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Initiative, which put in place a two-year transitional process in an effort to end the conflict in the country. These processes have differed in their legal status and mandate, their independence from the government, their inclusiveness, and the role they played in the transition (Papagianni, 2014).

National dialogues have also been implemented with varying degrees of success in Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, Bahrain and Yemen following the Arab spring (Yohannes & Dessu, 2019)

10 Conclusion and Recommendations

- The political and socio-economic situation that we are in, in the result of accumulated political faults which has its root in the nation building process of the country. That was reinforced by the policies of subsequent suppressive and anti-democratic regimes which followed the policy marginalization, assimilation and other policies and programs which aggravated and tensions between the state and citizens. The Myopic leaders, in an objective to consolidate power have mushroomed hate, mistrust and animosity among people of different identity, specifically among different ethnic and religious groups.
- The two and half year old reform in Ethiopia was welcomed by almost all sections of the society and all political parties, irrespective of their ideology, policy, program and social base. However, that high expectation fast depleted due to diverse reasons. Different group blame and finger point each other for 'failure' of the 'reform project'. Many still believe there is still a chance to fix the staggering reform process, by conducting a genuine and comprehensive full-fledge national dialogue package.
- The country has never conducted a serious, comprehensive and all inclusive national dialogue. All the regimes used temporary crises management approaches to appease and silence political oppositions. However, that doesn't solve the problem, rather helped the national problems to get more complex and violent. The country has reached a level where further delay in conducting a national dialogue could cost the nation a lot.
- National Dialogues have been used as an instrument to resolve political crises and pave the way for political transitions and sustainable peace. A successful political could help fix the existing lethal political discourse, and lay the foundation for a new social contract
- The planned national dialogue should be genuine in all its formats. It shouldn't be launched as a tool to gain or reclaim political legitimacy or get international recognition. Such an attempt could not only solve the crisis but also further develop mistrust among political actors and within the wider societal groups. The dialogue should be democratic enough to allow for the expression of divergent views and ideas including those considered to be eccentric and taboo.
- The full concept of the national dialogue should be properly internalized by the government and all other participants. National Dialogue is not mean a serious of conferences or simply elite negotiation. It is one of the political tools to address the root causes of conflict and

violence. National dialogue needs technical skill for its proper management in the planning, processing and implementation of the findings of the dialogue. Hence, it needs painstaking planning and preparation, aided with independent and skilled experts from home and also abroad.

- The country should never go for the 6th General election before completing its national dialogue. That will be a very dangerous experiment, with huge risk of political complication and could lead the country to a situation which non-could predict.
- Last but not least, care should be taken that a national dialogue is not a panacea for all evils of the Ethiopian politics and socio-economy. Like other conflict resolution mechanisms, National Dialogues carry the risk of being abused for short-term political gain. Lack of proper and genuine political will by, specially, the government and the ruling party and other major political actors including the political elite, could give the national dialogue impotent. Poorly designed and processed national dialogue may also further escalate tensions and end up with political deadlock.

Reference

Annan, K. (2010). *Kenyan National Dialogue and Reconciliation .*

Bekele, Y., Kjosavik, D. J., & Shanmugaratnam, N. (2016). State-Society Relations in Ethiopia: A Political-Economy Perspective of the Post-1991 Order. *Social Science* .

Berghof Foundation. (2017). *National Dialogue Handbook A Guide for Practitioners.* Berline.

Berghof Foundation. (2017). *National Dialogue Handbook A Guide for Practitioners: Executive Summar.* Berline: Berghof Foundation.

Berhe, A. (2008). *A Political History of the Tigray People's Liberation Front (1975–1991): Revolt, Ideology and Mobilisation in Ethiopia.* Amsterdam: Tsehai Publishers.

Blunck, M., Vimalarajah, L., Wils, O., Burg, C. v., Lanz, D., & Mubashir, M. (2017). *National Dialogue Handbook: A Guide for Practitioners.* Berline: Berghof Foundation Operations GmbH.

Blunck, M., Vimalarajah, L., Wils, O., Burg, C. v., Lanz, D., & Mubashir, M. (2017). *National Dialogue Handbook: A Guide for Practitioners.* Berline: Berghof Foundation Operations GmbH.

El-Battahani, A. E.-H. (August 2014). *National Dialogue in Sudan: Past Experiences and Current Challenges.* Khartoum: Sudan Democracy First Group, University of Khartoum.

FEP. (2020). *National Dialogue in Ethiopia.* Concept paper.

Haider, H. (2019). *National dialogues: lessons learned and success factors.* Brighton, UK:: Institute of Development Studies.

Haider, H. (2019). *National dialogues: lessons learned and success factors.* Helpdesk Report 4KD.

Harlander, J. (2016). *Supporting a national dialogue: Dilemmas & options for third parties.* Geneva, Switzerland: Centre for Humanitarian.

International Crisis Group. (2019). *Keeping Ethiopia's Transition on the Rails.* frica Report N°283, Brussels.

Lenjiso, B. (2018, July 25). *Inclusive Dialogue, National Reform & Reconciliation in Ethiopia: A Meta-Modeling Approach*. Retrieved from https://eapri.org: https://eapri.org/index.php/resources/blogs/item/24-inclusive-dialogue-reform-reconciliation-in-ethiopia-a-meta-modeling

Mubangizi, O. (2018, May 15). *Dr. Abiy Ahmed's Ethiopia: Anatomy of an African enigmatic polity*. Retrieved from Pambazuke New: https://www.pambazuka.org/democracy-governance/dr-abiy-ahmed%E2%80%99s-ethiopia-anatomy-african-enigmatic-polity

Paffenholz, T., Zachariassen, A., & Helfer, C. (2017). *What Makes or Breaks National Dialogues?* Geneva: Inclusive Peace & Transition Initiative (IPTI) (The Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies).

Papagianni, K. (2014). *National Dialogue Processes in Political Transitions.* Brussels, Belgium: Civil Society Dialogue Network.

Stigant, S., & Murray, E. (2015). *National Dialogues: A Tool for conflict transformation* . United States Institute of Peace.

United states Institute of peace. (2020, 03 07). *National Dialogues: A Tool for Conflict Transformation?* Retrieved from https://www.usip.org/: https://www.usip.org/publications/2015/10/national-dialogues-tool-conflict-transformation

Veen, E. v. (2016). *Perpetuating power Ethiopia's political settlement and the organization of security.* The Netherlands: Netherlands Institute of International Relations 'Clingendael'.

Yohannes, D., & Dessu, M. K. (2019, March 27). *National dialogues are key to peace in the Horn* . Retrieved from https://issafrica.org: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/national-dialogues-are-key-to-peace-in-the-horn

Yohannes, D., & Dessu, M. K. (2019, March 27). *National dialogues are key to peace in the Horn*. Retrieved August 9, 2020, from https://issafrica.org: https://issafrica.org/iss-today/national-dialogues-are-key-to-peace-in-the-horn

Yohannes, D., & Dessu, M. K. (2020). *National dialogues in the horn of africa: lessons for Ethiopia's political transition.* Addis Ababa: The Institute for Security Studies (ISS).