

Peacebuilding Commission Working Group on Lessons Learned

Lessons Learned from National Dialogue In Post-Conflict Situations

Chair's Summary

Introduction

1. On 14 October 2009, the Peacebuilding Commission's Working Group on Lessons Learned (WGLL) convened a panel discussion on "Lessons Learned from National Dialogue in Post-Conflict Situations." The session examined the contribution of "national dialogue" as a means to build confidence among national actors and to forge consensus on key political, economic and social measures in support of the peacebuilding process. Lessons learned were extracted from the case studies presented to inform the international engagement in supporting such processes in other post-conflict countries. A key lesson learned is that 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.

2. The WGLL convened national experts with experience in designing and facilitating national dialogue processes in different post-conflict countries. The three panelists were:

- a. Ms. Mariama Gamatié, former Nigerian Minister of Communication and Culture, who focused her presentation on lessons learned from her comprehensive experience with national dialogue in Burundi and in her native country Niger;
- b. Mr. Garaudy Laguerre, former director of the Institute for Advanced Social and Political Studies (ISPOS) and currently attorney at law in Haiti who presented on efforts in Haiti; and finally,
- c. Mr. Bernardo Arevalo de Leon, Director of the United Nations/Interpeace Joint Program who shared his vast experience in facilitating and supporting national dialogue in many countries, with a focus on lessons learned from the series of dialogues following the peace accords in his native Guatemala.

3. In his opening remarks, Ambassador Park In-kook, Vice-Chair of the Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) and Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea to the United Nations (representing Ambassador Carmen Maria Gallardo Hernandez, Chair of the PBC Working Group on Lessons Learned), underlined that the work of the PBC to date has highlighted the importance of coordinated international support to national dialogue in the countries on its agenda. He made reference to the June 2009 Report of the Secretary-General on Peacebuilding in the immediate aftermath of conflict (S/2009/304) which identified support to political processes, including through "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.

4. The case studies (Burundi, Guatemala, Haiti and Niger) illustrated that national dialogues have varied remarkably in both scope and application. Some aim to resolve specific rifts or tensions and to redirect the public discourse in a more constructive direction. Others seek to build consensus around a new system of governance or to reach a consensual identification of national priorities to develop a “common vision.” Dialogues may further be held to develop sectoral policies to convert previously agreed priorities and principles into action on the ground (e.g. education, fiscal policy, health & nutrition, social services), as for example in Guatemala. Different configurations and modalities of dialogues such as inter-party dialogues or informal roundtables, convened by the government, by civil society or by the international community, can take place in parallel and complement each other, aligned behind a common goal. While there is no “one size fits all” methodology for conducting national dialogue, the exercise demonstrated that certain principles such as inclusiveness and national ownership - comprising government and political actors, state institutions and civil society - are a precondition for successful national dialogue.

5. During the discussion, panelists and Member States, including representatives of countries on the PBC agenda, highlighted some conclusions and lessons learned based on the presentations by participants.

Lessons concluded from presentations and discussions:

- National ownership is collective ownership. National ownership encompasses the inclusion of all relevant stakeholders with links between the political and grass roots levels, so that people feel their interests are represented. Fair representation of stakeholders must take into account power dynamics, but may also be determined based on the credibility of the actors in the eyes of the population in order to bring moral credibility to the process. Dialogues which are “hijacked” by one party will fail to deliver peacebuilding outcomes, and may actually be counterproductive. Experience (Burundi, Niger) further illustrates that drawing on the existing cultural and institutional traditions of a country, based on a spirit of tolerance and respect, can help to ensure that the wider population identifies with the process. Further, in Niger, recourse to women with expertise in mediation and conflict resolution was a determinative contribution to the success of the national dialogue process. In Haiti, the involvement of civil society, trade unions, and churches encouraged political players to speak to their constituents.
- Strong facilitation and the right leadership are essential for success. The strengthening of existing national capacities should have priority over the creation of new (and often expensive) mechanisms to support dialogue. However, if dialogues are not well managed they may be vulnerable to political manipulation. It is important that facilitators have authority and credibility, as well as the commitment and resources to take recommendations forward. The question of how the process is implemented is as important as who convenes the dialogue. For example, in Haiti, defining general “parameters” or “guidelines” for dialogue

increased transparency and prevented focus on irrelevant issues. In Guatemala, successful dialogues had both credible leadership and sound methodologies. The ones who faced challenges or failed were deficient in one or both of these elements. The question of “where” the dialogue takes place can also be important. The answer to this question is highly contextual: what is right for one issue might not work for another and what is impossible at a certain point in time might be possible later on. In any case, consideration should be given to the political, psychological and symbolic dimensions of venues. In the Haitian case, dialogues taking place outside the country (i.e. in Norway) encouraged frank discussion that would have been more difficult to achieve in the highly sensitive national context. It is important, however, that the results are made public and are applied on the ground upon return to the country.

- Successful dialogues combine a strong political mandate with a capable technical secretariat and adequate resources attached to the implementation of recommendations. To support a country’s stability, dialogue must be convened in a context of manifest political will and civil and democratic behaviour of national actors. Improvisation may lead to political opportunism and failure. Furthermore, mobilizing sufficient economic resources and technical capacities for the implementation of agreed outcomes and recommendations has been a major challenge to dialogue processes in post-conflict countries.
- National dialogue should be seen as a tool to support the peacebuilding and democratisation strategy of a country, not as an end in and of itself. National dialogues are one among other activities that can be applied in a peacebuilding context. Their outcomes can be optimized if they are part of a wider integrated strategy. National dialogues have to be conceived alongside strategies for strengthening national institutions, complementing but not replacing them, and with the ultimate aim of building up national mechanisms and capacities for managing tensions and preventing conflict in the long run.
- Results of dialogue can include (a) tangible elements like the strengthening of institutions, government structures, courts etc.; (b) specific products achieved through the dialogue process (policy impact) such as a better understanding of issues, priorities and challenges, and of reciprocal needs and positions, as well as shared principles and goals or concrete policy recommendations (e.g. draft legislation); and (c) intangible elements like social-cohesion and confidence building between the government, political parties and the civil society. The contribution of the process to the peacebuilding needs (process results) opens new channels for inter-sectoral communication (within society, between civil society and state), more commitment to collaborative leadership, and a strengthened civil society which is legitimized as a partner in policy making.
- Plan for “process results”. National dialogue can be a tool for achieving concrete “policy impacts,” but its main contribution can sometimes be in producing “process impacts” that strengthen the capacity of society to engage in

collaborative action beyond the national dialogue itself. In the process that leads to the development of the specific products of the national dialogue, important “intangible” elements for collaboration are produced: transformed perceptions and attitudes, skills for dialogue and negotiation, channels and methods for communication are assets that can be recycled in further collaborative action. The development of these “process results” requires careful planning and follow-up. The best dialogues are designed with a follow-up strategy, building on the outcomes to ensure further impact.

- Artificially initiated dialogues can lead to negative outcomes to the detriment of the peacebuilding process. Excessive and inconsequential use of dialogue can lead to “dialogue fatigue.” Use of national dialogue as a political distraction and manipulation of national dialogue with the intention of imposing pre-cooked results can result in political cynicism and a de-legitimation of dialogue as a mechanism.
- Visibility and transparency. It is crucial to develop the necessary communication expertise to raise awareness on the dialogue among stakeholders, including the wider population. In Burundi, a public relations strategy helped to create awareness and ownership for the dialogue process, even in remote parts of the country. The experience further highlighted the importance of positive media coverage which does not exacerbate existing tensions. Visibility and transparency are also important tools of accountability by creative incentives for leaders to deliver on the commitments made as an outcome of a publicized dialogue process.
- Role of the International Community in support of National Dialogue. Depending on the context, and respecting the principle of local ownership, the role and relevance of the international community in the implementation of national dialogues will vary. In some instances, the International Community may contribute discretely in providing technical and financial support to national efforts, while in others it might be called upon to assume a more active role as a “guarantor” of the neutrality and transparency of the process. A balance must be struck between the level of visibility of the International Community required to allow it to fill the specific role it is called upon to play, and the need to ensure that this does not lead to putting local actors in the shadows or erode local ownership. The role of the International Community in any given dialogue should evolve throughout the process into a lighter, less visible role as national ownership strengthens. There is no single recipe for the appropriate involvement of the International Community. However, if international partners become referees or judges of the dialogue process, something is not working.

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