



National dialogue as an avenue for national consensus and sustainable peace: reflections from some selected Districts of Sidama Region, Southern Ethiopia.

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Abstract

National dialogue is proposed as a strategy to foster cooperation and sustain peace. With multiple conflicts ongoing in Ethiopia, plans are underway for a national dialogue aimed at achieving national consensus and lasting peace. This article examines the feasibility of the Ethiopian national dialogue by focusing on one ethnic group—the Sidama people. Through key informant interviews, group discussions, and informal conversations, the study identifies conditions that can facilitate or hinder national dialogue, challenges during the preparation and process phases, and anticipated obstacles in the implementation phase. The success of the national dialogue in Ethiopia largely depends on the participation and inclusion of diverse stakeholders in the political process. Within Sidama, while there is considerable variation in awareness and understanding of the national dialogue, the majority support the initiative and is committed to its success and implementation. Ensuring broad participation, a diverse agenda, trusted conveners, and a clear plan for implementing recommendations are critical factors that will determine the dialogue's effectiveness. Local ownership and the involvement of a respected national facilitator are crucial to producing meaningful results.

Keywords: National dialogue, prospects and challenges, sustainable peace

1. INTRODUCTION

National dialogues are increasingly recommended as mechanisms to overcome internal divisions and rebuild relations between states, institutions, and various groups in conflict-torn societies. Their aim is to design a new social contract between the conflicting parties. UNESCO (2022) highlights that 89% of current conflicts occur in countries with low levels of intercultural dialogue, emphasizing the need for both national and intercultural dialogues to foster cooperation and sustain peace.

Over the past decade, national dialogues have gained importance as platforms for peaceful transformation (Marike et al., 2017). In fragile or post-conflict environments, political settlements are crucial for addressing conflicts over interests, ideologies, and power through nonviolent means. National dialogues provide an opportunity to address the root causes of conflict, particularly when previous constitutions have failed to provide an inclusive social contract that satisfies citizens' needs (Getahun, 2023).

According to Zambakari (2016), national dialogues are powerful tools for peacebuilding, widely implemented across Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Latin America. Recent efforts to initiate national dialogues are evident in countries such as Libya, Sudan, Somalia, Mali, Lebanon, and Myanmar. These dialogues bring together major stakeholders when political institutions collapse or lose legitimacy. They are also commonly used in transitional societies to collectively deliberate on key issues critical to progress (Zambakari, 2016). Ethiopia is the most recent case where a national dialogue has been proposed to reconcile differing opinions and seek national consensus. Historically, Ethiopia has been portrayed as a nation where various ethno-linguistic groups coexist harmoniously. Many observers have used Ethiopia as an example for other parts of Africa, referring to it as a "land of gods," a "bastion of African independence," an "ethnic museum," and a "mosaic of peoples" (Levine, 2000). However, recent history stands in stark contrast to this image. Ethno-nationalist political narratives have intensified ethnic polarization, intercommunal intolerance, and violence, threatening the country's unity.

The Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) overthrew the authoritarian military regime in May 1991 and ruled for nearly three decades, until 2018. Under Meles Zenawi's leadership, divisions within Ethiopia were largely controlled, but his death in 2012 led to the unraveling of the political settlement. By 2014, protests began, calling for new political arrangements. In 2018, a reformist coalition emerged, offering early hope for political openness. However, concerns grew over a perceived return to a unitary state and the continuation of imposed political settlements by the ruling elite (Adem, 2021). Before 1991, Ethiopia was a centralized state that promoted national unity as a political doctrine. Following the military regime's fall, the country was restructured as a federal entity, granting ethnic groups significant autonomy. This decentralized system, however, created boundaries between ethnic groups, resulting in certain ethnic groups dominating and oppressing others (Yohannes, 2022). Discontent grew, especially among minority groups, who demanded greater access to power.

When Abiy Ahmed assumed office in 2018, his government initially sparked hope for a transition toward a more equitable political order, human rights protections, and societal harmony. However, widespread grievances soon emerged, leading to political instability and violent conflict. Ethiopia is currently marked by numerous violent conflicts, intercommunal divisions, and large-scale human rights violations. Ethiopia's political transitions have historically been turbulent. The 1974 revolution that overthrew Emperor Haile Selassie, the 1991 defeat of the Derg military government, and the 2018 political shift were marked by significant unrest (Emebet et al., 2021). While the 2018 transition was relatively peaceful, the consequences were severe, leading to ongoing political chaos and violence (Meressa and Dawit, 2020). Ethiopia's instability is rooted in long-standing state-building deficits, including divergent interpretations of its political history, a lack of social cohesion, and the absence of national consensus on major state symbols and institutions (Meressa and Dawit, 2020).

In light of these deep-seated divisions and ongoing crises, a national dialogue has been recommended as a means to foster unity (Yohannes, 2022). The Ethiopian National Dialogue

Commission, established in January 2021 (FDRE Proclamation No. 1265/2021), has a three-year mandate to address the root causes of past violence, investigate historical injustices, and promote peace and reconciliation (Kinkino, 2023). As inclusive national dialogue is a new concept in Ethiopia, little research has been conducted on its preparation, process, and implementation from an anthropological perspective. Previous discussions have been largely political, with limited attention given to how citizens perceive the proposed dialogue. This article offers insights into the national dialogue by engaging with grassroots reflections from the Sidama people in the Aletawondo, Hula, and Daraotlicho districts in southern Ethiopia. It explores what national dialogue means to the people of Sidama, examines the conditions that enable or constrain its success, and identifies challenges in the preparation, process, and implementation phases. While this article provides a view from the Sidama region, similar research in other parts of Ethiopia is necessary to capture broader perspectives and set the stage for a truly national dialogue.

2. UNDERSTANDING NATIONAL DIALOGUE

2.1. What is National Dialogue?

National dialogue is a tool for political transformation and conflict resolution, aimed at rebuilding a nation divided by deep-rooted historical conflicts. It addresses issues of national importance, including long-standing causes of conflict that often resurface due to political protests or armed revolts. Designed as inclusive, multiparty negotiations, national dialogues manage political transitions during times of crisis and state fragility. They typically focus on political reforms, constitution-making, and peacebuilding (Tura, 2023). Formally mandated or authorized by the state, national dialogues have a clear structure that outlines rules and procedures for discourse and decision-making. They provide an opportunity for meaningful conversations about the underlying drivers of conflict and how to transform them comprehensively (Marike et al., 2017).

National dialogues have been held in various contexts under different labels. Examples include national conferences in Benin, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (formerly Zaire), Togo, Mali, Niger, and Chad; multiparty negotiations in South Africa; roundtables in Poland and Germany; constituent assemblies in Bolivia and Afghanistan; and national dialogues in Bahrain, Yemen, Tunisia, and Lebanon (Marike et al., 2017; Getahun, 2023). The U.S. Constitution-making process of 1787 could also be seen as a form of national dialogue, involving representatives from all states to negotiate the nation's future. Similarly, political reforms, transition processes, and constitution drafting in southern Europe (Portugal, Spain) and Southeast Asia (South Korea, the Philippines) in the 1970s and 1980s were facilitated by processes akin to national dialogues (Abyssinia, 2022).

2.2. Phases of National Dialogue

National dialogues typically unfold in three phases: preparation, process, and implementation (Marike et al., 2017; FDRE Proclamation No. 1265/2021).

2.2.1. Preparation Phase

The preparation phase is essential for building support for the dialogue. This stage includes mini-negotiations to foster confidence among parties, elites, and the public, particularly in

environments with high levels of distrust. Agreements during this phase focus on preventing violent conflict, restoring trust between the state and society, and rebuilding political order after a conflict. A timeline for the negotiation process is established, along with frameworks for the dialogue. Substages include exploration, consultations across party lines, mandate setting, the official announcement of the dialogue, and the creation of a planning framework. Additionally, participants are identified, and inclusive methods of participation are determined, alongside an awareness of the positions and perspectives of various stakeholders.

2.2.2. The process phase

The process phase is where the dialogue takes place. The national dialogue process phase is the most well publicized, and all stakeholders become involved. The key tasks of the process phase are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Tasks in the process phase of national dialogue

No	Tasks	Issues covered
1	Setting the agenda	Laying out the agendas that will be discussed in order. The sub phase aids in fostering and generating among the populace a common understanding of positions and vision.
2	Finding a trusted and credible convener	Selecting numerous reliable conveners from various societal and institutional groups that can be accepted by all stakeholders.
3	Determining size	Deciding/projecting sizes of the groups participating in the discourse.
4	Selecting participants	Identifying participants of the dialogue. A complex, multistep process is frequently used to choose participants, and it should be planned to reflect the sociological makeup of the society in relation to the issue(s) at hand.
5	Setting guiding principles and ground rules	Ensuring that the ability to watch the process and engage effectively is supported by procedural fairness, which is a crucial component in building legitimacy.
6	Developing decision-making and consensus building modalities	This encourages legitimacy and a strong commitment from a wide variety of actors to the process and its results when done correctly.
7	Engaging the public	Public outreach and consultation are required to ensure that the procedure will be accepted by wider society. Public support and buy-in are increased when people can participate in the process and follow it while offering comments at various points.
8	Creating support structures, deadlock breaking mechanisms and safety nets	Frameworks need to be specifically created to aid in breaking through impasses, deadlocks and stalemates and to maintain the fundamental discourse and negotiation process. It is crucial to make use of national customary methods and tools that have been employed to forge agreements and end impasses.

Source: Marike et al, 2017; Tura, 2023

2.2.3. The Implementation Phase

The third and final phase of a national dialogue is the implementation phase, where the agreements reached are put into action. This phase involves mechanisms for achieving both short-term and long-term results, which can be either tangible or intangible. Tangible outcomes include constitutional changes, security transitions, strategies for addressing past conflicts, and transitional justice. Intangible outcomes involve relationship building and civic education. The

implementation phase may also include the creation of infrastructure, guarantees, monitoring systems, and follow-up dialogue forums to ensure accountability.

For sustainable outcomes, it is essential to foster an open and participatory approach during implementation, adhering to the spirit of the dialogue process. Managing expectations is crucial, and the process must include all stakeholders, promote transformation, and remain open to further dialogue.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted in the southern¹ Sidama zone, focusing on three woredas—Hula, Aletawondo, and Daraotilicho—out of the 37 woredas in the Sidama region². Purposive sampling was used to select informants from these woredas. Fieldwork took place between February and September 2023, with informants selected to represent a range of socioeconomic backgrounds and political perspectives. Participants included farmers, merchants, religious leaders, government officials, and opposition party members, both in the study area and in Addis Ababa. A total of 18 key informant interviews (including 5 women), four in-depth interviews, and three focus group discussions (one with a women's group) were conducted. Secondary data was gathered from academic and grey literature, government proclamations, and media reports. All research participants provided informed consent for the interviews and had the option of being anonymized in the analysis. The research adhered to ethical protocols. The data was coded and analyzed thematically.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Key Principles of the Ethiopian National Dialogue

The preamble of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation acknowledges differences and disagreements on fundamental national issues. It further states that resolving these differences is a necessity, not a choice. The proclamation recognizes that broad-based, inclusive public dialogue is the only way to resolve these variances, with the ultimate goal of building national consensus and fostering a culture of trust (FDRE Proclamation No. 1265/2021). The Ethiopian national dialogue is guided by several key principles: inclusivity, transparency, credibility, tolerance, mutual respect, rationality, context sensitivity, the need for an impartial facilitator, depth and relevance of agendas, democracy and the rule of law, national interest, and the use of traditional knowledge and values (FDRE Proclamation No. 1265/2021).

Key informants from the study area appreciate the federal government's commitment to the national dialogue, as demonstrated by the establishment of the National Dialogue Commission. The release of political prisoners, including opposition leaders, at the outset of the Prosperity Party's government was seen as a positive step towards reconciliation, justice, and inclusivity. However, informants also noted that any government that fails to prioritize political solutions over military action risks protracted armed resistance and insurrection. As [Mehari \(2020\)](#) argues, a "war of visions" can only be resolved through a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue, as military solutions are insufficient. This section also explores the perceptions of each key

¹ There are 10 woredas in southern Sidama zone: Hula, Chirone, Titicha, Bursa, Aletawondo, Aletachuko, Dara, Dara-otilicho, Aleta-wondo town, and Aleta-chuko town. Aleta-wondo is the capital town of southern sidama zone.

² Sidama region is divided into four zones. These are northern sidama, central sidama, southern sidama, and eastern sidama zones. Hawassa, Yirgalem, Aletawondo, and Bensa-daye are the capital towns of northern, central, southern, and eastern sidama zones, respectively.

principle—its importance, relevance, and the government's commitment to upholding these principles.

4.1.1. Inclusivity and Participation

The National Dialogue Commission has categorized Ethiopians into nine groups to ensure diverse participation: people with discernible livelihoods, women, youth, self-help organizations, community leaders, public servants, teachers, artisans, and the business community (Tegbaru, 2022). Informants from the study area reported attending a one-day zonal-level conference with two commissioners of the national dialogue at the Aletawondo Center. Approximately 4,500 people participated, including teachers, religious leaders, merchants, government employees, farmers, youth, women, and pensioners. However, some informants from Agereselam revealed that the selection of participants was biased in favor of Prosperity Party members, with opposition party members excluded. This exclusion raised concerns about the dialogue's legitimacy, as inclusivity is critical to maintaining the public's trust in the process.

4.1.2. Transparency and Public Participation

While 4,500 residents attended the zonal conference at Aletawondo, some informants expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of awareness activities at the woreda and kebele levels. The one-day conference was deemed insufficient for ensuring widespread public participation, especially in rural areas where knowledge of the national dialogue is limited. Informants suggested that increased media coverage, particularly on FM radio (which has a wider audience than national television), could improve transparency and public engagement in the dialogue process.

4.1.3. Credible Conveners

Informants stressed the importance of having credible conveners to enhance the legitimacy of the national dialogue. These conveners should come from diverse backgrounds and should not have political aspirations that could lead to conflicts of interest. However, in some woredas, Prosperity Party members were the main actors in the dialogue process, which undermined its credibility. Informants recommended involving respected community figures such as elders, religious leaders, teachers, and agricultural or health extension workers as conveners to increase trust and legitimacy.

4.1.4. Clear Agenda and Key National Issues

A well-defined agenda is crucial for ensuring focused and inclusive dialogue. Agenda items should be agreed upon before the dialogue commences, often requiring pre-negotiations. Focus group discussants in Aletawondo and Agereselam expressed concern about delays in setting the agenda and selecting participants, noting that two years had passed since the commission was established with little progress. They argued that national issues like constitutional reform, identity, border disputes, and federalism are well-known and should have been addressed more swiftly. Additionally, participants in Sidama raised local issues, such as conflicts between the Sidama of Chire woreda and neighboring Oromia woredas, as topics requiring attention in the dialogue. They also highlighted broader concerns, such as the national flag and the rising cost of living, which, though not directly related to the dialogue, impact public focus and engagement.

4.2. Prospects and Challenges

While many community members are hopeful that the national dialogue will lead to national consensus, they also expressed concerns about its challenges, including the impartiality of conveners, ongoing conflicts in Amhara, and the exclusivity of the process. Tura (2023) argues that addressing these challenges is essential for the national dialogue to enhance peace, democratization, and constitutionalism, and to serve as a catalyst for nation-building. Some informants were optimistic about the dialogue's potential to address key issues like identity conflicts, governance, and contested national symbols. However, others expressed concerns about the exclusion of armed groups like the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), fearing it could undermine the dialogue. Yet, others believed their exclusion could help the dialogue succeed by focusing on peaceful stakeholders.

4.2.1. Prospects

There is wide anticipation that the national dialogue will address a range of issues, including recurrent conflicts, the rule of law, identity-related matters, corruption, governance, and border disputes. Focus group participants emphasized that forgiveness and reconciliation are critical to achieving lasting peace. They argued that forgiveness, though difficult, is essential for healing and coexisting peacefully.

4.2.2. Challenges

Despite the optimism, numerous challenges could impede the national dialogue's success. These include the lack of public awareness, the overriding focus on the cost of living, a lack of transparency, and concerns that the dialogue may be a Prosperity Party endeavor rather than a truly national effort. Informants in Agereselam reported that opposition party members were excluded from the selection process, which contradicted the proclamation's principle of inclusivity. Moreover, some informants criticized the national dialogue for being initiated during a state of emergency in the northern region, when political and democratic rights were suspended. They feared that this undermined the legitimacy of the dialogue and its capacity to resolve deep-rooted issues.

4.2.3. Procedural Fairness and Inclusivity

Procedural fairness and inclusivity are critical to the success of any national dialogue (ENDC, 2022). However, some informants expressed concerns about the transparency of the process, particularly in selecting the 11 commissioners. They questioned whether merit, integrity, or political affiliation played a role in the selection, fearing this lack of transparency could undermine the dialogue's credibility.

4.2.4. Implementation Strategy

The success of the national dialogue will depend not only on the process but also on the implementation of its recommendations. Since the countrywide plenary has yet to be held, the commission must develop clear strategies for implementing the dialogue's outcomes. Deadlock-breaking mechanisms should also be established to address potential disputes during the dialogue process and keep the process on track. Some informants suggested that an independent body, such as a human rights commission or civil society organization, should

monitor and evaluate the commission's and the government's activities to ensure the effective implementation of dialogue outcomes (Zerihun, 2023).

5. CONCLUSION AND KEY REFLECTIONS

5.1. Conclusion

Despite varying levels of awareness regarding the upcoming national dialogue, informants in the study area strongly support the initiative and emphasize the importance of adhering to the timeframe set by the commission to maintain momentum. While the establishment of the National Dialogue Commission is promising, its success hinges on transparency and inclusivity, as outlined in the Proclamation. Ensuring broad participation, a diverse agenda, trusted conveners, and a clear plan for implementing recommendations are critical factors that will determine the dialogue's effectiveness. Local ownership and the involvement of a respected national facilitator are crucial to producing meaningful results.

5.2. Key Reflections

5.2.1. *The Federal Government*

The federal government should not view the national dialogue as an end goal but as part of a broader transitional roadmap that includes economic, political, and judicial reforms. Ensuring the rule of law and the safety of citizens across regions is critical, as informants raised concerns about rampant violence, detention, and insecurity, particularly in regions like Amhara and Oromia. To achieve a successful dialogue, the government must work toward peace and stability by engaging armed groups and opposition parties in discussions. Additionally, economic challenges, particularly inflation, must be addressed to ensure public focus on the dialogue. A consistent public update on the dialogue through diverse media outlets would enhance transparency and accountability. An independent body should monitor the process to ensure adherence to the Proclamation and report to the House of Representatives.

5.2.2. *The Commission*

National dialogue commissioners must remain free from ethnic, religious, or political biases and be accessible. They should devise an inclusive communication strategy to ensure the public is informed about the dialogue's objectives and outcomes. Media campaigns, particularly radio broadcasts, should target all sectors of society, including rural communities, minorities, and the diaspora. The dialogue process will take time and must align with local values such as trust, mutual respect, and reconciliation. The commission should request an extension of its term if necessary and clarify that the dialogue is not about "resolving" conflicts but transforming differences into constructive discussions for nation-building.

5.2.3. *Opposition Parties*

Opposition parties should reconsider their boycott politics and engage in negotiations with the government and the commission to reconcile differences and contribute to the national dialogue's success.

5.2.4. *The Public*

The wider public must actively participate and support the commission and the government in achieving the goals of the national dialogue. They should prioritize this national issue, take ownership of the process, and ensure that the dialogue's recommendations are implemented.

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8. CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

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