



**THE ROLE OF POLITICAL DIALOGUE IN
PEACEBUILDING AND STATEBUILDING:
AN INTERPRETATION OF CURRENT
EXPERIENCE**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Political dialogue refers to a wide range of activities, from high-level negotiations to mediation to community attempts at reconciliation. These processes of political dialogue are complementary and normally run in parallel. In this report political dialogue will be used in a flexible manner, but the parameters are that the dialogue must be political in nature and aimed at addressing threats in a society which can cause a lapse or relapse into violent conflict. The objective of political dialogue is to achieve practical and peaceful solutions to problems. At a deeper level, the aim is to address conflict drivers and foster reconciliation, build a greater national consensus and social cohesion, and define a shared vision of the future. In many cases regular state institutions are not functioning properly because they have been compromised by political bias, corruption, and inefficiency. The role of political dialogue in such contexts is to strengthen the legitimacy of institutions by building consensus on and trust in their proper functioning. As a result, political dialogue in all its forms plays an indispensable role in efforts by national actors and the international community to respond to violent conflict and to build national vision in fragile contexts. It takes place among national actors at all levels of society; among international actors; and between the international community and national actors. The focus of the report is political dialogue within conflict-affected countries, but in the context of international support.

The report reviews experiences with political dialogue in a broad range of countries and based on this identifies four main types of dialogues; presents preconditions for successful dialogue; and proposes key strategic elements of interventions to support effective political dialogue.

Types of political dialogue

Political dialogue takes place in many forms; is initiated and facilitated by a variety of actors; and takes place at various levels of society. Four main types of dialogue have been identified: (i) High-level or summit dialogues involving the top leadership of contending sections of the population. These dialogues are often initiated or mediated by the international community. These are high-risk events, with much at stake. (ii) Track Two interventions by civil society organizations that provide discreet and relatively low-risk opportunities to explore options, and build trust and skill in the process of dialogue. (iii) Political dialogue that takes place as an indispensable aspect of planning for peacebuilding, statebuilding and development. It is increasingly, but not yet sufficiently, understood that such planning has to be driven by political dialogue. (iv) Multi-level dialogue, where dialogue takes place at various levels of society in an effort to engage citizens in building sufficient national consensus on critical challenges. These four approaches are not mutually exclusive, rather complementary. Each type has its advantages and limitations. It is often advisable to pursue different types of dialogue in parallel, on the condition that they pursue the same overall objectives and are not contradictory.

Preconditions for successful dialogue

Political dialogue is a complex political and psychological process. For success it relies on specific preconditions and professional attention. An under-estimation of its complexity contributes to failure. Moreover, pursuing dialogue in inappropriate manners and at inappropriate times may do harm because of the way it reduces confidence, increases cynicism and contributes to what has become known as ‘dialogue fatigue’. The preconditions for successful dialogue are:

- Adequate preparation:
 - Conducting an objective, reliable analysis of the conflict and parties’ interests and fears.
 - Learning lessons from past experiences, particularly the reasons for past failures.
 - Designing an appropriate process; clarifying and allocating roles of different support actors.
 - Setting up a support structure to deal with funding, logistical arrangements and financial management.
 - Pre-mediation consultation to ensure sufficient buy-in of all parties into the process.
 - Planning an appropriate communication strategy with the press.
- *Credible facilitation.* It is crucial to have a skilled facilitator that all parties accept and feel comfortable with in order to make the process as fair and even-handed as possible.
- *Sufficient political commitment.* Political will is important for the dialogue to reach inclusive agreements; and for effective implementation. Political commitment is influenced by internal and external political pressure; but is strongest when participating parties enjoy a sense of ownership of the dialogue process.
- *Collective leadership capability.* A critical factor determining the success of dialogue is the capability of leaders to form coalitions across political and social divides in order to implement decisions that have been made through the dialogue process. Where the capability to form such coalitions does not exist, little can be expected from dialogue in terms of lasting results.
- *Adequate inclusion.* The aspect of inclusion is of critical importance because exclusion is often a major cause of conflict. It is in most cases a contentious issue; and in reality difficult to satisfy all. It is, however, necessary to be “inclusive enough” to safeguard the legitimacy of decisions. The inclusion of women is crucial as the political dialogue process can be a window of opportunity for addressing structural inequalities. The inclusion of youth is also highly important given the demographic realities of many societies.

Strategies for dialogue

It is possible to improve the effectiveness of political dialogue through well-designed interventions. The five strategies that hold most promise are:

1. *Strengthening leadership capability to form productive coalitions.* The improvement of the knowledge, attitudes, and skills of the collective leadership of a society with regards to participative leadership and dialogue holds much promise.
2. *Infrastructures for peace.* Establishing or supporting existing councils or committees at every level of society that are made responsible for implementing dialogue as a first response to escalating tensions - supported by expert facilitation capacity. The approach relies on existing institutions (government, civil society and traditional), providing effective linkage and coordination between them. The approach has also shown promising results when used in the context of potentially violent elections.
3. *Conducting planning processes as political dialogue.* In a context where planning for development has immediate consequences for either a return to violence or constructive peacebuilding, planning cannot be conducted as purely bureaucratic procedures. There is increasing use of PRSP, UNDAF or similar planning processes as opportunities to achieve consensus at various levels of society on developmental priorities. These processes also provide opportunities for dialogue with donors. The understanding is that planning should not outpace political consensus, but should be aligned to political reality and conducted as political dialogue. All the preconditions for successful dialogue therefore apply to these processes.
4. *Attention to the implementation of agreements.* It is normal that the implementation of agreements resulting from dialogue will be troubled by recurring doubts, ongoing intra-party and inter-party tensions, and new challenges. It is therefore necessary to pay specific and serious attention to measures to support the implementation process. Measures to be considered in this regard include the validation of dialogue results through as broad a public process as is possible. Civil society institutions have a critical role to play in monitoring agreements and holding parties to account. Conducting planning as ongoing political dialogue, as discussed above, will also contribute to constructive implementation. On the whole it means that the dialogue process does not end with the signing of agreements, but has to continue with a focus on implementation. Agreements should therefore include provision for procedures or institutions to monitor implementation and facilitate ongoing dialogue.
5. *Institutionalization of dialogue support.* Given the need for expert support to mediation and facilitation processes, it is in the interest of individual societies and the international community to invest in and support institutions that focus on deepening knowledge through research, that improves facilitation skills through training, and that have the capacity to provide technical support to dialogue processes. Such institutions exist at international level

(e.g. the UN's Mediation Support Unit), and at regional, sub-regional and national levels - including CSOs that specialize in this area.

Political dialogue and the international community

Complex socio-political conflicts are not solved through once-off dialogue events, but through ongoing, multi-faceted and multi-level dialogue processes. Building sufficient social cohesion and functional democratic institutions in societies that have been ravaged by violent conflict is a process that takes decades rather than years. Political dialogue, in other words, has to be sustained across all the levels of society for a prolonged period of time. It is therefore necessary, for the countries involved and donors alike, to invest long-term in the capacity of a society to conduct political dialogue. The short-term perspective that still holds in some circles of the international community and that sees the first post-crisis democratic elections as the end of the crisis, has to change.

The international community has played a substantive role in initiating, facilitating and supporting political dialogue in conflict-affected societies. Yet, its role is not without its controversies and dilemmas. A substantive dialogue between G7+ countries and the international community has to be initiated on how to find 'best fit' solution, i.e. institutions and procedures, addressing context-specific conditions. This report offers a number of building blocks for such a dialogue.

INTRODUCTION

The International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding (ID) is an initiative that connects countries experiencing conflict and fragility and international partners in a dialogue to "...jointly shape and guide international assistance to support peacebuilding and statebuilding."¹ The ID aims to create a set of critical peacebuilding and statebuilding objectives as framework for (inter)national engagement, as well as an action plan containing key commitments on what countries experiencing conflict and fragility and international partners need to change in their focus, interventions and ways of working together to realize better results. At its Dili conference in 2010, political dialogue was identified as one of four areas that need urgent attention. The aim of this report is to inform the discussions and recommendations of the working group on political dialogue of the ID.

Political dialogue in all its forms is an indispensable instrument in the quest for peace and stability in the world of today. The importance of political dialogue has grown as the world went through a dramatic period of change in the nature of armed conflict and political crisis over the last two decades. Since the ending of the Cold War intra-state conflict has surpassed inter-state war as by far the dominant form of violent conflict. The dynamics of the intra-state conflicts of today differ sharply from that of inter-state wars. They are seemingly intractable, where 'violent conflict exacerbates the conditions that gave rise to it in the first place'², and affect entire populations, with civilians bearing the bulk of casualties and humanitarian crises. They do substantial damage to the social fabric of a society by deepening levels of distrust and resentment among its constituent sections. In addition, intra-state conflict often results in a serious reduction in governance capability with harm done not only to the efficiency of public institutions, but also to their political legitimacy.

As a consequence the response to violent intra-state conflict has to entail much more than keeping the peace and forging a national peace agreement³. It requires processes of reconciliation at all levels of society, the re-building of confidence in democratic institutions, and facilitating a sufficiently coherent national vision to drive development. For all these tasks political dialogue is an indispensable tool.

While the main objectives with political dialogue are pursued through intra-country processes, they often take place in a context shaped by the engagement and support of the international

¹ Dili Declaration 2010. For more information: www.pbsbdialogue.org

² Human Security Report: War and Peace in the 21st Century, 2005

³ More civil wars today are ended through a negotiated agreement than through military victory (Toft 2006; Jarstad and Sisk 2008), which indicates the increasing reliance on dialogue as a peacemaking mechanism. However, these agreements are often fragile, with approximately 50% of cases relapsing into violence within 5 years (Fortna 2008:50). It underscores the need to build peace in an ongoing manner through multiple and multifaceted interventions.

community. The role of the international community in responding to intra-state violent conflict is, in fact, substantial. It provides a normative framework for the settlement of disputes through the various protocols and human rights regimes of the United Nations and regional organizations. Moreover, it provides practical and logistic support to a wide spectrum of interventions aimed at restoring peace and returning order to a society. The United Nations, in partnership with regional and sub-regional actors, are increasingly called upon to mandate, manage and finance multi-dimensional peacekeeping operations, political missions and mediation efforts, while at the same time dealing with the various humanitarian crises. It amounts to a considerable engagement that, by its sheer weight, impacts on and shapes the environment in which political dialogue has to take place. This fact points to the need for and importance of political dialogue not only between international actors; but more importantly between international and national actors. They have to address issues of mutual trust, reach consensus on the objectives to be achieved jointly, and the best strategies to follow.

The focus of this report is therefore on in-country political dialogue, as it is the primary context where political dialogue has to take place, but in the context of international support. This focus is based on the assumption that the ultimate aim of internal and external responses to violent conflict is the promotion of an internal political culture where political and social tensions and contradictions are managed constructively through processes of inclusive political dialogue. Consequently the objective with the report is twofold: first, to survey and interpret experience with in-country political dialogue as a mechanism for conflict prevention, peacemaking and peacebuilding in order to recommend strategies for its improvement. Political dialogue is not a panacea that is appropriate for all conditions and effective under all circumstances. It is important to identify the preconditions for successful dialogue. Second, the report will begin to show that political dialogue is increasingly, but not sufficiently, driving national and international decision-making on the allocation of international assistance and aid.

Defining what is meant by political dialogue is problematic⁴. Concepts like mediation, facilitation, preventive diplomacy and political dialogue are used fairly interchangeably in the field. Consequently political dialogue may refer to a wide range of activities, from high-level negotiations to mediation to community attempts at reconciliation. In this report political dialogue will be used in a similarly flexible manner, but the parameters are that the dialogue must be political in nature and aimed at addressing threats in a society which can cause a lapse or relapse into violent conflict. The objective of political dialogue is to achieve practical and peaceful solutions to problems, and, at a deeper level, to address conflict drivers and reconciliation, build a greater national consensus or cohesion, and a shared vision of the future⁵. The discussion is also underpinned by the assumption that political dialogue is an essential mechanism for promoting a peaceful democracy. Inclusive political dialogue is, by its nature, a democratic activity. Peaceful political dialogue therefore is an expression

⁴ For a discussion of the theory of dialogue and a distinction between, mediation, facilitation, debate, and dialogue, see Ramsbotham, O., T. Woodhouse, et al. (2005); Pruitt, B. and P. Thomas (2007); Ramsbotham, O. (2010) and Van Brabant (2011) .

⁵ The report won't address transitional justice measures such as Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, which may also seek to address issues of truth, reparations and post-conflict reconciliation. See Report of the Secretary-General, *The rule of law and transitional justice in conflict and post-conflict societies*, S/2004/616

of democracy. When properly implemented it also contributes to the promotion of democratic practices by allowing the voices of all sections of society to be heard. Political dialogue is not in opposition to institution-building. However, in many cases state institutions are not functioning properly because they have been compromised by political bias, corruption, and inefficiency. The role of political dialogue in such contexts is to strengthen the legitimacy of institutions by building consensus on and trust in their proper functioning. Extraordinary processes of dialogue are at times necessary to achieve this purpose.

The report firstly provides an overview of the various strategies to stimulate and support intra-state political dialogue. It classifies these efforts into four categories: summit dialogues that involve the top leadership of a country; Track Two dialogues initiated by civil society; dialogues that are implicit in planning and governance activities; and multi-level dialogues that seek to involve all levels of the society. Following the typology, the report discusses the preconditions for successful dialogue in light of recent collective experience, namely adequate preparation, credible facilitation, sufficient political commitment, collective leadership capability, and adequate levels of inclusion. It then proceeds to discuss strategies to promote and support political dialogue on the basis of best practices that have been identified. It pays specific attention to strategies to promote a culture of political dialogue, with reference to the stimulation of and support to leadership coalition formation; the establishment of infrastructures for peace; grounding development and other planning in political dialogue; attention to the implementation of agreements; and support for institutions that specialize in dialogue support. The report also discusses the role of the international community and donors, and suggests areas that call for improvement. It ends with a set of conclusions.

Conclusions

1. The contribution of political dialogue to post-violence reconstruction and reducing fragility is its role in facilitating consensus, strengthening legitimacy, building trust, promoting reconciliation, and enabling productive coalitions between important actors. Dialogue plays a necessary role in violence prevention, peacemaking and peacebuilding. It is also indispensable in institution building because of its contribution to strengthening the legitimacy of institutions and in ensuring ‘best fit’ solutions.
2. Political dialogue takes place in many forms, with each approach having specific advantages and disadvantages. It means that care has to be taken in designing a dialogue process. Success is not guaranteed, and failure may do harm because of reduced confidence and dialogue fatigue. However, there is sufficient evidence that the impact of political dialogue can be strengthened and improved through well-designed interventions.
3. It is evident that a specific dialogue process is not able to address all the variables that cause conflict. There is need for multiple interventions that complement each other and that operate at different levels of society.
4. Political dialogue is a complex undertaking that relies on specific preconditions and that benefits from professional attention. The preconditions are adequate preparation, credible

facilitation, sufficient political commitment, the collective leadership capability to form productive coalitions, and sufficient inclusion.

5. Complex political problems and deeply embedded patterns of distrust and hostility cannot be solved through a once-off dialogue event. The process of building sufficient social cohesion and functional institutions in a society that has been ravaged by violent conflict is a long-term process of two to three decades. The focus therefore has to be on strengthening procedures or institutions that have the capacity to sustain dialogue processes. Ultimately the objective has to be a political culture that resorts to dialogue as the first response to rising tensions.
6. It is in the interest of affected societies and the international community to invest in procedures or institutions that assume responsibility for ongoing dialogue and that enhance the potential for success with dialogue. These include institutions that specialize in dialogue support; 'infrastructures for peace'; and projects that provide opportunities for the strengthening of leadership capabilities.
7. Planning for peacebuilding and development has to be driven by political dialogue. These are political matters with the potential to either contribute to further violence or to peace, and should not be pursued in a purely technical or bureaucratic manner. It is important to ensure that the political dialogue that should underpin these processes is conducted with full awareness of the preconditions for success.
8. The implementation of dialogue results is an area that needs particular attention, particularly in terms of strengthening procedures or institutions to assist the implementation process. What is clear is that the need for dialogue does not end when an agreement is signed. Political dialogue remains necessary throughout the implementation process.
9. Political dialogue between g7+ countries and the international community has to focus on 'best fit' solutions; and the constraints and risks that inhibit such a quest.