

Research article

Ethiopia's National Dialogue: analyzing its potential and challenges in achieving durable peace and nation-building

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Abstract: Dialogue is a contemporary mechanism for resolving conflicts by creating new contexts, refreshing insights and accommodating different dimensions of diversity. Ethiopia is striving to resolve a long-standing and shorter-term political-economy crisis through a national dialogue. This paper explores the potential contributions and challenges of the national dialogue in Ethiopia, as the country seeks to address its political and economic crises and pave the way for enduring peace and nation-building. By engaging in a qualitative analysis using key informant interview and secondary data sources, this study argues that national dialogue holds significant promise for nurturing peace-building efforts, particularly by addressing deep-rooted, intractable conflicts and curbing protracted social conflicts. Furthermore, through the creation of a "new social contract" based on a shared vision and a common national identity, a national dialogue can contribute to the broader process of nation-building. Despite its potential benefits, however, the national dialogue process faces several formidable challenges, including the ongoing conflict with insurgent groups,

competing visions for the future, the withdrawal and boycott of the political elite, and the devastating consequences of the armed conflict in the north of the country. To overcome these obstacles, this paper proposes several measures, including the negotiation of peace agreements with insurgent groups, the establishment of transitional justice mechanisms, the promotion of stakeholder inclusivity and the reduction of positional dialogue. In conclusion, while the national dialogue process in Ethiopia is currently beset by several challenges, its potential contributions to peace-building and nation-building efforts cannot be overstated. By adopting a comprehensive and strategic approach that includes a range of measures aimed at promoting inclusivity and reducing conflict, Ethiopia can harness the power of national dialogue to build a more peaceful and cohesive society.

Keywords: National dialogue, peace building, nation building, Ethiopia, conflict

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1. Introduction

Dialogue is one of the approaches that are mostly used and cut across all other approaches to conflict resolution and transformation. Dialogue is a distinctive way of communicating which is the essence of relationship (Bercovitch, 2008). Bercovitch further notes that given the many cultures where political, social and economic exchanges are habitually confrontational and divisive, aspiring to a culture of dialogue; a different way of relating would be great contribution to the peaceful resolution of differences, to productive lives and to democratic practice. Dialogues are designed to build understanding, cooperation and positive relationships. Dialogue is also described as a conversation in which people speak openly and listen respectfully and attentively. Dialogue excludes attack and defense and avoids derogatory attributions based on assumptions about the motives, meanings, or character of others.

The point of dialogue is to deepen mutual understanding, to expand sympathy and imagination, to exchange not only arguments but also sensibilities, to take a critical look at oneself, to build mutual trust, and to arrive at a more just balanced view of both contentious issues and the world in general. By establishing mutual understanding, participants learn to respect one another, including their differences (Bercovitch, 2008). Note that the primary goal of a dialogue approach is not necessarily to reach an agreement but rather mutual understanding. For instance, it would be difficult to reach an agreement in a dialogue on value-based issues in such situations; dialogue allows the parties to learn about one another's perspective, without expecting them to compromise their values.

Limited scholarly discussions exist on the topic of national dialogue in Ethiopia. For instance, FEP's (2020) concept paper offers a comprehensive overview of Ethiopia's National Dialogue process, highlighting its objectives, framework, and potential outcomes. While emphasizing the significance of fostering dialogue and reconciliation among Ethiopia's diverse stakeholders, the paper may not extensively address the enduring aspects of peacebuilding and nation-building.

In contrast, Lenjiso's (2015) article proposes a meta-modeling approach to promote inclusive dialogue, national reform and reconciliation in Ethiopia. This approach provides a systematic framework for addressing Ethiopia's socio-political challenges, involving diverse stakeholders,

promoting transparency, and ensuring the sustainability of reform efforts. However, the article may fail to provide comprehensive solutions for enduring peace building and nation-building.

Andualem's (2022) analysis of Ethiopia's national dialogue process evaluates its alignment with the principles established by organizations such as the United States Institute of Peace and the Berghof Foundation. However, it lacks a focus on key aspects of national dialogue, nation-building, and the associated challenges. To address these gaps, this article sets out to achieve several objectives. First, it aims to examine how national dialogue can contribute to fostering nation-building. Second, it seeks to analyze the specific ways in which national dialogue can support nation-building efforts in Ethiopia. Third, the article will identify the challenges faced by the national dialogue process in Ethiopia. Finally, it aims to highlight the factors that could contribute to the potential success of Ethiopia's national dialogue initiatives.

1.2. National Dialogue: conceptual framework

National dialogue is defined 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). 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 conflicts. 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).

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. 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.

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). 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). National dialogues can be used to fulfill a range of objectives. They may focus on a narrower 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. (2017) identified two main types of national dialogues, identified according to the function they seek to

fulfill. 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 a limited mandate, smaller size and shorter duration. Tunisia is a good example in this type of national dialogue. 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 an eventual goal to introduce fundamental institutional changes. Such an initiative has a 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, manage crises or reframe state-society relations. They should not, however, be conducted as a tool to calm mounting political pressure or appease local stakeholders and international partners. According to Paffenholz et al. (2017), opposition parties, the government and 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. 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 status quo. The following political context factors play a decisive role in influencing the outcomes of national dialogues (Paffenholz et al., 2017; Haider, 2019). The greater the level of political will and elite agreement on the way forward, the greater the likelihood of successful outcomes and implementation such as resistance from the national elite or support, links to other transitional

processes, common ground among parties, public support, learning from past experience, existing culture of dialogue, the role of external actors and national ownership.

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) such as representation, number, and selection of actors, confidence-building measures, decision-making procedures, choice of mediators and facilitators, support structure for involved actors, coalition building among included actors and provision for implementation. Ethiopia's current political landscape is marked by significant polarization and fragmentation, with intense animosity among political groups and parties. Political tolerance has reached a historic low, while at the community level, ethnic and religious tensions are exceptionally high. In the past five years, numerous clashes driven by ethnic or religious factors have resulted in widespread violence, the displacement of millions and numerous deaths across various regions. To address these issues, the short-term objectives focus on achieving sustainable peace and stability, building trust among political parties and stakeholders and creating a roadmap for Ethiopia's political process. For the long term, the goals include negotiating a new social contract at both national and regional levels, redefining state-society relations to enhance democratic systems, establishing new political institutions and improved security arrangements, determining the reform process and facilitating constitutional amendments.

2. Materials and Methods

The paper has been analyzed utilizing the qualitative research approach, which is considered instrumental in addressing research queries requiring explanations or understandings of political phenomena and their contexts. This method is also valuable for exploring and comprehending the meanings attributed by individuals or groups to social or human predicaments. Consequently, the paper is intricately linked to the social and political issues facing Ethiopian citizens, and it adheres to a case study design. This design is crucial for affording a comprehensive and vivid portrayal of events pertinent to the case. According to Cohen et al. (2005), the case study design is robust in that it facilitates the comprehension of results by a broad audience, and it furnishes insights into other analogous circumstances and cases. The design is pivotal for understanding human beings within a social framework by interpreting their actions and behaviors as a collective or community. Therefore, this study concentrated on the matters and circumstances of political security, and institutional and legal challenges of dialogue in Ethiopia. Finally, the researchers employed primary (key informant interview) and secondary sources of data.

3. Results and Discussion

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 marginalized groups and the ability to keep all the political actors inside the political process” (Yohannes & Dessu, 2020).

3.1. How will National Dialogue endure peace building in Ethiopia?

Peace building is a complex and multidimensional exercise, ranging from disarming conflicting parties to rebuilding structural, legal, institutional, security and operational arrangements. Galtung coined the term “peace building” back in the 1970s.

3.2. Contemporary conflicts in Ethiopia

According to the interview held with peace and security experts, Ethiopia has experienced a series of conflicts including protracted social conflicts, deep-rooted conflicts, and intractable conflicts. It is imperative to note that national dialogue can serve as a crucial mechanism for the country in moving towards peace-building, constitutional amendment and nation-building, which can lead to the transformation of contemporary conflicts and a more harmonious society. Other interviewees also elaborated that the context of protracted social conflicts are often violent struggles by communal groups for basic needs such as security, recognition and equitable access to political institutions and economic participation. Often, these conflicts are between communal groups and the state, particularly in states where one ethnic or religious group controls the "machinery of the state" and uses it to discriminate against other groups. National dialogue provides a platform for addressing the underlying issues that lead to these conflicts.

The establishment of common institutions through national dialogue is critical in resolving protracted social conflicts and promoting peace-building. This approach ensures that communal groups take equal ownership and responsibility for state institutions which can prevent the recurrence of conflicts and foster a more inclusive society. It is, therefore, crucial to encourage and promote national dialogue as a means of resolving protracted social conflicts towards achieving a more peaceful and prosperous Ethiopia.

The Ethiopian context features a recurrent latent conflict known as "deep-rooted conflict," which pertains to conflicts grounded in human needs that are considered non-negotiable, such as identity, recognition, participation and security. It is posited that identity groups will exhaust all possible means to satisfy these needs and that such conflicts are not easily suppressed, contained or resolved, whether through coerced or negotiated settlements based on the interviews held with political science experts. These conflicts are considered more structural and systematic and are caused by constitutional and structural violence. To attain positive peace in Ethiopia, it is crucial to address issues relating to self-government, representation within the state system, and participation in the decision-making process on matters affecting the state and its constituents. Intractable conflicts are recognized as complex and challenging to resolve. These conflicts are characterized by perpetual violence, perceived irreconcilability, centrality to the identity groups involved and a zero-sum game. They are total in that they revolve around the needs and values essential to the survival of the conflicting groups.

In Ethiopia, a national dialogue is considered a practical solution to address both long-term and short-term crises. This approach can enhance the peace building process in the short term by putting an end to recurrent violent conflicts and restoring fundamental rights and liberties. Moreover, it can address the humanitarian crisis, promote healing and reconciliation, and overcome political crises, leading to the establishment of negative peace building (interviews with experts of national dialogue).

To resolve Ethiopia's intractable conflicts and establish a sustainable peace building framework, it is crucial to engage in a national dialogue. This process will allow for the promotion of social cohesion, inclusive governance and sustainable development. To achieve these goals, several long-term issues must be addressed, such as democratic institution-building, relationship-building, prejudice reduction, power-sharing arrangements, reduction of social and economic inequalities, the promotion of the rule of law, security sector reform and education. Addressing these matters is essential to construct a positive peace building environment. It is, therefore, recommended that policymakers and stakeholders prioritize these structural prevention measures and incorporate them into their peace building strategies. Doing so will enable Ethiopia to move towards a more peaceful state.

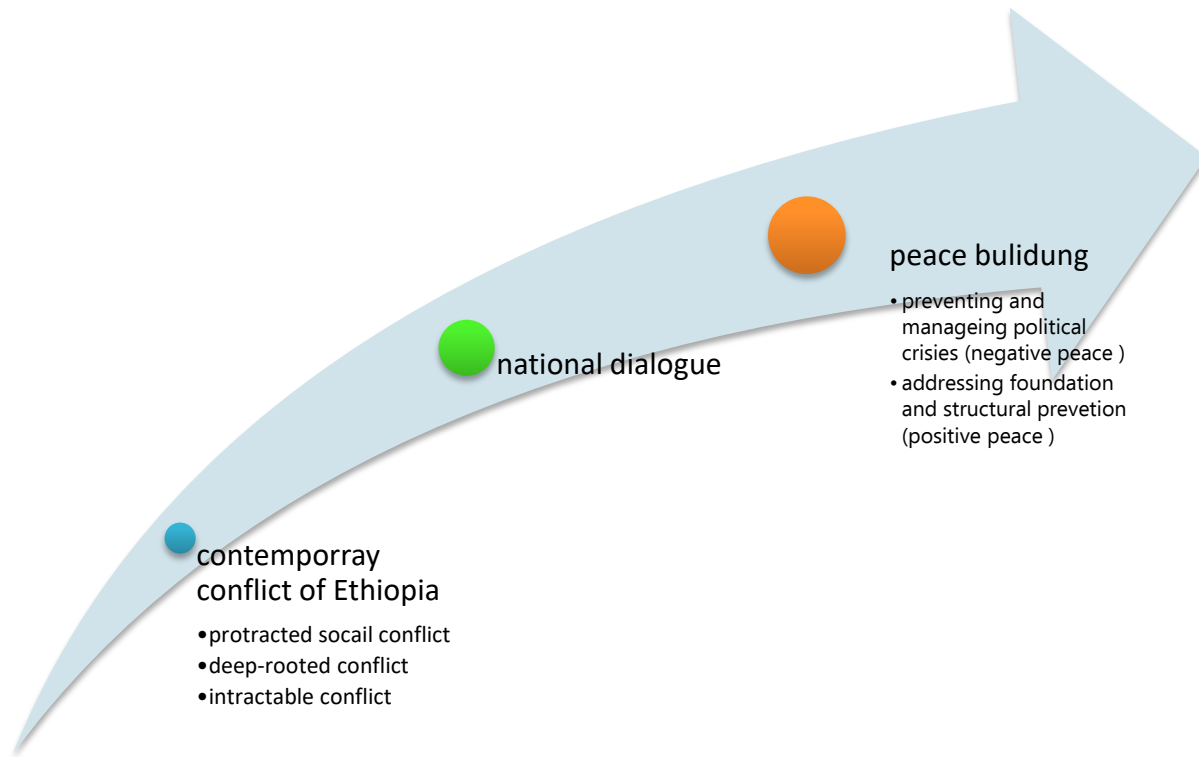


Figure 1. How national dialogue can reverse the contemporary conflict of Ethiopia to peace building process

3.3.The contribution of National Dialogue to foster nation building

Nation building is a term that encompasses various meanings and applications in different contexts. However, at its core, it refers to the process of creating a shared national identity and community by integrating individuals within a defined territory (Alesina & Reich 2013). This process often entails drawing on pre-existing customs, traditions and institutions; redefining them as national characteristics in order to support the nation's claim to sovereignty and uniqueness. In essence, nation building strategies aim to establish a supra-national identity that transcends sub-national identities and cultures. It is essential to note that nation building is a complex process that requires careful consideration and planning. A successful nation building endeavor should integrate and respect the existing diversity of the communities involved while building a sense of national unity. As such, the process should be inclusive and participatory, with a focus on empowering all members of society to contribute to the creation of a shared national identity (Ibid).

In conclusion, nation building is a multifaceted process that requires thoughtful planning, inclusivity and respect for diversity. By integrating individuals from various backgrounds and celebrating the unique characteristics that make a nation diverse, it is possible to create a shared national identity that promotes unity and sovereignty.

Nation-building and state-building, though often used interchangeably, denote different concepts. State-building generally focuses on creating and strengthening state institutions necessary for a functioning state, while nation-building is concerned with cultivating a national identity, which is also crucial for a state's functionality (Alesina & Reich, 2013). To better understand nation-building, it is essential to clarify what constitutes a 'nation' and to distinguish it from the concept of the 'nation-state' with which it is frequently conflated. Key elements that define national identity include (a) territory, encompassing the homeland or 'historic land', (b) a community or patria, which represents a group bound by laws and institutions with a unified political will, (c) Citizenship, along with a sense of legal equality among its members, and (d) common values, mass culture, civic ideology, and traditions, including shared historical memories, myths, symbols and customs (Smith, 1991).

3.4.How will National Dialogue foster nation building in Ethiopia?

The ongoing national dialogue in Ethiopia aims to foster inclusivity and promote basic human and democratic rights while simultaneously instigating structural adjustments within the country. This initiative is expected to promote democracy, which will, in turn, solidify state nationalism. Similarly, the other interviewees explained that by accommodating diversity through this national dialogue, Ethiopia is taking a crucial step towards strengthening its democratic values and reinforcing its national identity. The dialogue is expected to create a space where all citizens can have their voices heard, and their rights respected. As Ethiopia strives towards consolidating its democracy, this national dialogue is a significant step in the right direction, and it is hoped that it will lay the foundation for a more equitable future for all Ethiopians, based on the interviewees.

a. Nationalism and democracy

The significance of dialogue in achieving successful nation-building, particularly in democratically constituted nations, cannot be overstated. It is important to note that nationalism, as a theoretical concept, does not necessarily require a specific form of government. However, any nation-building process involves a strong element of popular sovereignty, which is implicit in the process. Therefore, it stands to reason that democracy is a natural form of government for nations. Moreover, nationalism and democracy are mutually dependent, with the success of one depending on the other. The nation-building process in Ethiopia has encountered a number of challenges, particularly the exclusive reliance on a specific form of nationalism that is centered on the state, military or a single leader. This approach has resulted in the marginalization of civil societies, which are excluded not only from the institutional layout but also from the matrix of national identity. The upcoming national dialogue process presents an opportunity to promote democratic processes and contribute to the nation-building process. Through dialogue and inclusivity, Ethiopia can create a national identity that reflects the diverse perspectives and voices of its people. This will lead to a stronger and more inclusive nation, which will ultimately benefit all Ethiopians. ‘National’ identity refers to politico-economic and technological community. In a philosophical, legal and social theory sense, nation denotes ‘a community of people obeying the same laws and institutions within a given territory’ (Smith, 1991).

b. Elite consensus

The attainment of elite consensus is a crucial objective of the national dialogue in Ethiopia, given the pivotal role of this group in any nation-building process. While it may appear that achieving a sufficient level of accord among a relatively small and well-educated cohort is a more straightforward task than reaching a consensus across a population of millions, this is not necessarily the case. The majority of the elite represent vested interests, regions or professions, and as such, agreeing is by no means a foregone conclusion. The process of forging a viable consensus among the elite requires a significant degree of effort and skill, given the diverse backgrounds, interests and affiliations of its members.

The significance of elite consensus cannot be overstated, as it plays a pivotal role in the dissemination of national identity among the masses. The central tenet of nationalism, namely

popular sovereignty and fundamental equality, is a crucial precondition for its wider acceptance. The adoption of national identity by the elite is often driven by their interests, but it is contingent upon the recognition of a larger collective body, the nation, to pursue them successfully.

It is noteworthy that, despite the individualistic motives of the elite, the propagation of national identity is reliant upon a shared understanding and agreement, which ultimately leads to a broader societal consensus. The concept of popular sovereignty, in particular, is instrumental in bridging the gap between the elite and the non-elite, facilitating the spread of nationalism across all strata of society. Overall, these ideas highlight the complexities and nuances involved in the adoption and dissemination of national identity, underscoring the need for a multifaceted approach that takes into account the various factors at play.

c. Symbolic Institutions

The significance of national dialogues in fostering agreement and building trust in common identities is a crucial aspect of institution-building for nation-builders. It is imperative to incorporate existing institutions and traditions into the institutional framework of the nation, based on their relevance to the new national narrative. This is an open-ended process that requires a careful assessment of the impact of institutional structures on national identity and direction. The process may trigger a reform or abolition of certain institutions, which could result in political instability, social incoherence and conflicts surrounding fundamental questions of national identity and the national narrative. It is, therefore, essential to exercise caution and deliberate planning in instituting reforms, while keeping in mind the potential trade-offs involved. The political legitimacy of institutions and systems within the Ethiopian state has always been contested which can be resolved through national dialogue.

It is important to keep in mind that in a national context, all public institutions take on an additional, symbolic meaning. Not only are they supposed to perform certain political, social or economic functions but they also form the visible surface of the nation. The historical record would suggest that it can be helpful to remove predominantly symbolic institutions from the political fray as much as possible in order to preserve their meaningfulness beyond political partisanship.

3.5.Shared history and vision

National identity is often shaped by a shared history among citizens, but in Ethiopia, history has been a source of division, leading to recurring conflicts. The country's historical narratives have a centrifugal effect, and the war on history has perpetuated divergent views among the people. A national dialogue is needed to address these structural divergences and promote a shared vision for the future of Ethiopia. By focusing on common goals and promoting social cohesion, the country can move towards a more stable and united future. This national dialogue presents an opportunity to establish a roadmap for the state with a common future and shared vision, rather than a war of visions. By prioritizing social cohesion, Ethiopia can achieve greater unity and promote peaceful coexistence among its diverse population.

3.6.Challenges of National Dialogue in Ethiopia

Armed conflicts with insurgent groups of the state: The importance of inclusivity and credibility in any national dialogue process cannot be overstated. Creating an environment that fosters consensus on fundamental political issues among all political parties and interested groups is essential to determine the fate of a nation. It is imperative that no individual or group is left out of such a process. However, the ongoing armed conflict in Amhara and Oromia poses a significant challenge to the national dialogue process. Finding common ground on the future of the country is difficult while major armed conflicts continue. Therefore, it is crucial to address these conflicts before engaging in any national dialogue process that may not be inclusive or genuine. It is essential to establish an enabling political and social environment to foster conversations, forge agreements, and build consensus on the fundamental political questions. This environment should be conducive to the participation of all parties and interest groups, ensuring that every voice is heard.

In conclusion, while inclusivity and credibility are crucial to any national dialogue process, it is equally important to ensure that the environment is conducive to a genuine dialogue. The ongoing armed conflict in Amhara and Oromia poses a significant challenge to this process, and it is essential to address this before proceeding further.

War of Historical Narratives: Ethiopia's history and political landscape have been shaped by a "war of visions" regarding its future. While some view Ethiopia's past as a source of glory, others perceive it as a colonial state that imprisoned nations and nationalities. These two opposing views, which are mutually exclusive, have resulted in longstanding divisions within the country. Significantly, Ethiopians cannot agree on various national symbols, including history, heroes, flags, statues and the anthem. The existence of multiple historical narratives has led to deep-seated cleavages and has even been used as a tool to incite violence. Two primary approaches that have emerged in Ethiopia are centralization and decentralization. The former aims to recapture quasi-unitarian power that has been lost over the years, while the latter envisions increased power devolution, autonomy and even secession. Notably, these opposing views have deeply entrenched themselves within rival political parties and the central government's internal structure and machinery. As such, finding a consensus and reaching agreement on a way forward has been a significant impediment to Ethiopia's national dialogue.

Generally, Ethiopia's complex and divisive history highlights the need for a nuanced approach to the country's future. While the centralization and decentralization strategies offer divergent visions, it is crucial to find a solution that promotes unity and national cohesion. Achieving this objective will require a respectful and empathetic dialogue that considers all perspectives and seeks to find common ground.

3.7. Facilitators' neutrality of the National Dialogue

The importance of a credible convener for a national dialogue cannot be overstated, particularly in a polarized society such as Ethiopia. The success of the dialogue heavily depends on the integrity, impartiality, public perception of the mediator, facilitator or convener. The selection of an individual who is widely respected, independent and perceived as charismatic by the public can significantly enhance the strength and legitimacy of the national dialogue. The legitimacy of the process and its results are inextricably linked to the appointment procedures and the credibility of the convener. The experience of numerous states has demonstrated that national dialogues are more effective when led by reputable individuals and organizations. The legitimacy of the process and its outcomes are dependent on the organizers' selection and vetting procedures. In this regard, the selection of a convener who is perceived as impartial and

possesses credibility is critical. In summary, having a credible and trustworthy convener is essential for the success of a national dialogue in any society, and this is especially true in deeply polarized societies such as Ethiopia. Therefore, the commission must prioritize the selection of a convener who is perceived as impartial, respected and independent by the public. The appointment procedures must be transparent and fair to ensure that the process and its outcomes are legitimate.

3.8.The exclusive nature of the National Dialogue

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. Following exclusionary methods followed by the parliament, three main opposition parties have joined the boycott and withdrew from the national dialogue process. Those withdrawing from the national dialogue included OFC, ONLF and OLF.

The transformative potential of national dialogues can only be realized if they are genuinely inclusive of all segments of political parties; if an inclusive approach is not followed, the legitimacy of the process and a sense of ownership could be undermined from the outset. The degree of inclusiveness affects whether stakeholders accept the mandate, agenda or other decisions made. To this end, the withdrawal and boycott of political parties from the national dialogue in advance would critically undermine the success of the national dialogue with no reservation.

3.9.The adverse repercussions of the northern Ethiopia armed conflict

The two-year conflict between the Tigray Regional National State and the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and its affiliates had resulted in the deaths and displacement of more than hundreds of thousands of people. As per the estimates provided by Ghent University, Belgium, 600,000 non-combatants died during the Northern War between November 2020 and November 2022. Many of them were starved to death. If one adds fighters who died in combat, the total number of deaths could approach one million.

The armed conflict mostly affected the regional states of Tigray, Amhara and Afar. Despite the fact that the civil war ended as a result of the peace accord signed in Pretoria, South Africa, on November 2, 2022, the people of the Amhara National Regional State did not warmly accept the pacts. Specifically, the Nairobi Declaration of the Senior Commanders on the Modalities for the Implementation of the Agreement for Lasting Peace Through Permanent Cessation of Hostilities Between FDRE and TPLF paragraph 2(2.1) (d) has been the Pandora box. As per the reading of the declaration, “Disarmament of heavy weapons will be done concurrently with the withdrawal of foreign and non-ENDF forces from the region”.

The clause vividly ordered the reinstatement of the controversial areas of Welkait and Raya to the Tigray region. Welkait and Raya, the subject of the debate, are areas that the Amhara people have claimed since the creation of the present federal system. However, since the commencement of the war in 2020, Amhara regional state forces have been in charge of the two areas. As a result, the projected implementation of the peace agreement between the peoples of the two regions did not proceed very far. The Ethiopian National Defence Force's allies in the battle, the peoples of the neighboring nations and the armed militias known as the Fanno, have also lost faith in them as a result. Under this scenario, the mistrust and suspicion between the two peoples could hinder the success of the national dialogue and jeopardize peace building efforts.

3.1. How will the National Dialogue of Ethiopia be successful?

Prolonging the tenure of the National Dialogue Commission: In view of Ethiopia's national dialogue challenges and prospects, the following recommendations should be implemented in order to make the national dialogue contribute to strengthening national consensus and restoring social values. Three years is the maximum duration for Ethiopia's national dialogue, which is short to address all the issues presented in the paper's previous section, specifically, the commission's slow progress since its establishment by not concluding all of the preparation phase's sub-stages; the country's dearth of historical narrative and discourse mutual understanding, which would take a year; and the commission's term, which is undoubtedly being consumed by the ongoing peace negotiations with non-state entities and insurgent groups. In light of the aforementioned difficulties, the members of the House of Representatives should increase the term's length to five years.

Negotiating peace deals with insurgent factions: The Ethiopian federal government ought to vigorously carry out the peace negotiations that have already begun with the insurgency groups. Furthermore, every effort should be made to guarantee the inclusion of all major forces and the success of the goals of the national dialogue.

Ensuring criminal responsibility through transitional justice: The criminal responsibility of those who commit egregious human rights crimes should not be ignored as a result of the national dialogue. Transitional justice should be suggested as a solution to be put into practice in order to take into account all previous violations. Justice is the only way out of the historical and political impasse, as nations and nationalities have both been the victims and the perpetrators of egregious human rights atrocities.

Enhancing and fine-tuning the facilitators: Facilitators must be refined with careful consideration by the national dialogue commission. The panel must choose the national dialogue's organizers while taking into account their position in Ethiopian politics. This is carried out since their propensity for political parties barely threatens the viability of the national discussion.

Ensuring inclusivity of all stakeholders in the National Dialogue process: It is important to continuously consider the justification behind certain political parties' exclusion and boycott. In order to achieve this, the commission should develop a legitimate excuse for political parties to continue participating in the eagerly awaited national dialogue. This will guarantee the participation of foundational political parties and specific political party constituencies.

Establishing panel of experts on history: The fundamental cause of Ethiopia's chaotic political and social life is the narrative and discourse that are currently being spread among the populace by various elite groups. Such an infectious historical discourse requires a thorough and rigorous investigation by merit-driven experts. To do this, the commission must first organize a group of national and international history experts before delving into the contours of the national dialogue.

Promoting impartiality and multi-partiality: Impartiality is crucial for an effective dialogue process. Parties must perceive the process as fair and unbiased for conflict resolution to be

viable. Multi-partiality complements impartiality, aiming to rectify power imbalances and societal norms. It ensures equal participation and attention to diverse identities, preventing the exploitation of one group by another.

Trust building: Trust is the foundation of successful dialogue. Parties must trust both the process and facilitators for meaningful participation and commitment. Building trust involves upholding impartiality, promoting inclusiveness, and ensuring a fair process that considers the interests of all parties.

Avoid positional dialogue: This is a dialogue in which parties/communities hold adversarial mutual exclusive attitudes, play a blame game, hold on to their positions. In this type of dialogue, it is very hard to reach consensus, mutual understanding and appreciation. Therefore, avoiding positional dialogue is vital to successful of the national dialogue in Ethiopia.

Advocate increasing pro-change forces through dialogue: In a dialogue, pro-change and anti-change forces will appear. When pro-change forces increase and are powerful, the dialogue has the opportunity to be successful, unless the anti-change forces are numerous and have the chance to derail the process. Therefore, advocating the short term and long-term objectives of the dialogue will enhance the usefulness of the national dialogue.

4. Conclusion

National dialogue is a tool employed to restore social cohesion in a fragile society. It allows political and civil society actors to express their grievances and make concrete recommendations for the long-lasting resolution of conflict and development thereof. On the same note, Ethiopia's national dialogue process has provided a huge glimmer of hope for many Ethiopians since the initiation stage. It is believed that all the sources of the mess would come to an end with the commencement of the national dialogue. The same ambitious terms were stipulated in the proclamation of the national dialogue commission: that it will bolster national consensus and restore social values. At the same time, there were some who were skeptical of the national dialogue process due to certain pressing challenges.

5. Recommendations

Here are some recommendations to enhance the effectiveness and inclusivity of the national dialogue process in Ethiopia:

Ensure Broad Representation: To enhance the credibility and inclusivity of the national dialogue, it is crucial to ensure that all relevant stakeholders, including marginalized communities, ethnic groups and opposition parties are represented. This helps to address the diverse grievances and perspectives present in the Ethiopian society. **Facilitate Open and Transparent Communication:** Establish mechanisms for transparent communication throughout the dialogue process. Regular updates and clear communication about the goals, progress and challenges of the dialogue can build trust among participants and the broader public. **Address the Root Causes of Conflict:** Focus on addressing the underlying causes of conflict rather than just the symptoms. This involves tackling issues such as historical grievances, economic inequalities and political exclusion, which are often at the heart of societal tensions.

Strengthen Institutional Support: Ensure that the national dialogue process is supported by strong and independent institutions. This includes providing adequate resources, training and capacity-building for those involved in facilitating and mediating the dialogue. **Promote Constructive Engagement:** Encourage a culture of constructive engagement and compromise among participants. Implement mechanisms to manage disagreements and facilitate negotiations in a way that fosters mutual respect and understanding. **Incorporate Public Input:** Develop channels for public participation and input beyond the formal dialogue sessions. This could include surveys, town hall meetings, and other forms of engagement to gather a wider range of views and feedback from the general population.

Monitor and Evaluate Progress: Establish a robust system for monitoring and evaluating the progress of the national dialogue. Regular assessments can help identify areas for improvement, measure the effectiveness of the dialogue and ensure that commitments made during the process are being implemented. **Address Skepticism Proactively:** Acknowledge and address the concerns and skepticism expressed by various stakeholders. This involves actively listening to critiques and working to address legitimate concerns which can help to build broader support for the dialogue process. **Promote Reconciliation and Social Healing:** Integrate elements of

reconciliation and social healing into the national dialogue. This may include initiatives to promote forgiveness, understanding and healing among communities that have been affected by conflict.

Establish a Clear Follow-Up Mechanism: Develop a clear plan for implementing and following up on the recommendations and agreements reached during the dialogue. This includes assigning responsibilities, setting deadlines and ensuring accountability for the implementation of agreed-upon actions. These recommendations aim to strengthen the national dialogue process, ensuring that it becomes a more effective tool for resolving conflicts and fostering national cohesion in Ethiopia.

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