



Experiences with National Dialogue in Latin America

Main lessons from a roundtable discussion



San Salvador, El Salvador, November 20-21, 2000

In light of the many experiments with national dialogue and consensus-building that have taken place in Latin America over the last decade, the World Bank and IDEA organized a Roundtable on Experience with National Dialogue Processes in Latin America, which was held in San Salvador, El Salvador, on November 20 and 21, 2000.

The Bank and IDEA regard national dialogue as a fundamental instrument for: putting the most basic principles of democracy into practice; resolving disputes; building consensus; and strengthening and improving participatory governance and development. Both recognize that democracy, good governance and development are all complex and continuous inter-twined processes, for which there is no one single approach. It is essential to start from a comprehensive vision of development that includes not only economic and social, but also institutional, political, gender and environmental perspectives, among others.

The World Bank—through the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) (<http://www.worldBank.org/cdf/>) and WBI—and IDEA, with its methodology for Dialogue for Democratic Development (DDD) (<http://www.IDEA.int>), look at national dialogue as a promising mechanism for promoting broad social participation and fostering the sense of citizen ownership in the definition and operation of public policies and institutions.

Promoting national dialogue is a new field for most international development agencies, and much learning remains. Measures to promote representative democracy and development must be based on the shared ideas of players involved in those processes. Hence, documentation on regional and worldwide experience can facilitate and promote access to immediately useful information from similar undertakings in different contexts. Such information can then be evaluated and eventually adapted, in light of the priorities and aspirations of the players in the context in which it is to be used.

This summary report, which has been translated from the original text in Spanish, outlines some key aspects that must be taken into account when designing and undertaking national dialogue initiatives. This set of elements is the direct product of informal exchanges of experience between government and civil society protagonists in Latin America.

This summary is not intended to limit the broad and complex subject of national dialogue, but rather to collect and share experiences and views from players who have participated in the various stages of these processes.

Purpose

Faced with situations as diverse as the search for sustainable development strategies, addressing financial crises, negotiating peace, embarking on political change and reform—issues that have had an especially heavy impact in the region over the last decade—national dialogue has been spreading in Latin America. It has been seen as a means of building consensus for formulating public policies, and finding workable solutions and for overcoming specific circumstances that could not be resolved by existing formal institutions.

Given this context, the fundamental purpose of the San Salvador Roundtable on Experiences with National Dialogue in Latin America, from the institutional viewpoint, was to explore, for the first time and on the basis of experience in Latin America, the various approaches to

strengthening the processes of development and improving participatory democracy, through the encouragement of national dialogue.

Objectives of the roundtable

From the outset, the goal of the roundtable was not to evaluate, but rather to exchange experiences and to learn from this exchange.

Consequently, its objectives were to:

1. Conduct, for the first time, a comparative identification of experiences with national dialogue processes in Latin America.
2. Conceptualize dialogue: what do we understand national dialogue to mean in each country, and what are its characteristics?
3. Appreciate how these national dialogue processes have arisen in each country.
4. Recognize how national dialogue has developed in those countries where this process has taken place; what are its principal characteristics?; what is the level of participation?; what has been the degree of inclusiveness?; how much sense of citizen ownership has been generated?; and how decisions have been taken?, among other considerations.
5. Learn from the agendas that constitute the backbone of the national dialogue process. Among other factors, what are the priority issues?; what is the level of linkage or interrelationship among those issues?; how have priorities been established?; how broad or how focused have the debates been?, etc.
6. Understand how it has been possible to build consensus, and what is to be understood by the notion of consensus.
7. Identify those aspects of national experience that have worked, and those that have not, and why;
8. Determine what might be the major doubts, questions and suggestions from those countries that have not experimented with a national dialogue process;
9. Recognize the role that international agencies are playing, could play or have played in initiating and carrying out national dialogue processes. What is the understanding at the national level as to the role that international agencies should fulfill?

Proceedings of the roundtable

The roundtable took place in two one-day sessions, and was attended by representatives of official bodies and of civil society, from Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Guyana, Mexico, Peru and the Dominican Republic (see list of participants).

The working atmosphere of the roundtable was relaxed, frank and cordial, and encouraged articulation and sharing of the wealth and diversity of Latin American experience with national

dialogue. While no firm conclusions were reached, it did succeed in identifying both the lines of agreement and dissent among the views of participants, and across the various experiences.

In general terms, all recognized that dialogue is a fundamental practice for any democratic society. Under normal circumstances, dialogue should be fostered and channeled through the formal institutional route. Nevertheless, it was agreed that there can be circumstances where a participatory and inclusive approach to national dialogue, in a setting other than that of State institutions, can contribute to addressing critical issues facing the country.

Without denying the importance of national dialogue, it was noted that the very concept is open to different interpretations, depending on the context. In this respect, it was clear that some of the experiments in Latin America that were called “national dialogue” were in fact something different, in response to different circumstances.

Moreover, as a true reflection of the diversity of ideas surrounding national dialogue, the roundtable was able to show that there is no uniform view as to what the determining aspects are that define a dialogue as national in character, or what circumstances will give rise to it in practice. Thus, for some, the criterion will be defined by its purposes, and for others by its method, or by the representation of the different sectors participating in the exercise.

Again, some felt that dialogues are intimately linked to national strategic planning, while others looked upon them as ad hoc processes for dealing with exceptional situations of political impasse that cannot be resolved through formal institutional channels. There was not a unanimous view as to whether dialogues must necessarily arrive at agreements or not. In short, it was clear that there is no single reason for national dialogue.

The lack of any single concept or fixed terminology has sparked considerable debate and confusion in examining national dialogues. Thus, in some countries national dialogue has been looked upon as an instrument and in others, as a process, and sometimes as both.

National Dialogue: interpretation of the concept

There is no single concept or model for national dialogue.

For illustrative purposes, and without any preferential ordering, the outline below presents different interpretations of the concept of dialogue that were put forth at the roundtable. They reflect the diversity of opinions, ideas, perspectives and experiences with national dialogue processes that were described by participants.

Dialogue may be defined as the basic mechanism for developing a sense of citizen ownership with respect to a country’s institutions and the formulation of its public policies. It is the means for recognizing and bringing together the aspirations of the people and including them in government strategies and policy formulation, both at the national and the sub-national level, and in government decision-making.

Democratic dialogue may be regarded either as a method or as an outcome. To the extent that dialogue is a method, it is clear that without it, democracy loses its meaning. Evidently, in a democratic system, dialogue is the basis of the procedures on which good governance rests.

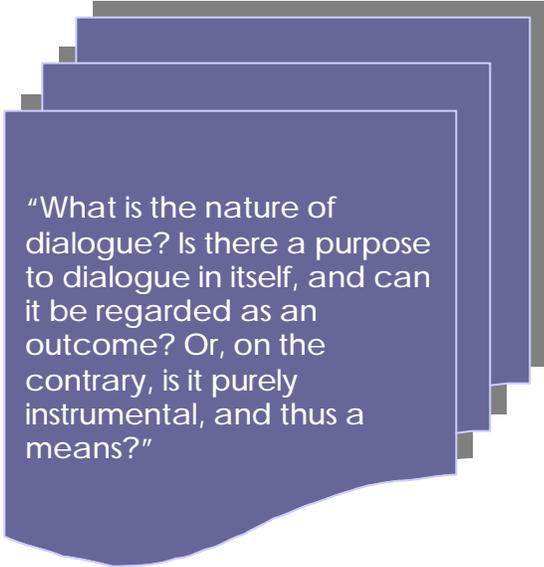
In this respect, dialogue is the implementation of a deliberative method. It is important for the public to discuss and deliberate, through their political parties and the organizations of civil society, so that discourse replaces imposition. This is because dialogue serves as a method for recognizing others, and for recognizing the legitimacy of those with whom we may not always share common interests or visions of the world or of society. Through dialogue, and by cataloguing our points of contention, we come to think not in terms of enemies but of adversaries.

Dialogue is also conceived as a method for building, in the general interest: the shared determination of political and civil society as to what is of interest and of importance to the country, rather than leaving such determination to the exclusive preserve of government.

Democratic dialogue also serves as a way of overcoming “corporatism”. In effect, by involving different civil and political institutions and sectors with their respective sectoral and particular visions, we can overcome those limits by taking into account the interests of other groups and facilitating the construction of a more or less common ideal that rise above these differences.

Dialogue also serves in constructing a country’s agenda of priorities, and as an exercise in participation.

While dialogue may be interpreted as a method, it must produce results. People participate in dialogue, not only because they like it, but because they want results. If people participate in a dialogue that subsequently produces no results, then dialogue will begin to abuse its limits as a method, and people will become disillusioned, with the consequent risk not only to the dialogue process itself but to the system as a whole.



“What is the nature of dialogue? Is there a purpose to dialogue in itself, and can it be regarded as an outcome? Or, on the contrary, is it purely instrumental, and thus a means?”

The processes of dialogue are understood as a:

- Mechanism of consultation and catharsis.
- Method for formulating proposals.
- Form of concerting efforts.
- Method for developing support for government proposals.
- Means for establishing communication with armed groups in the search for peace.
- Mechanism for reaching sectoral agreements (labor, social, education, health, etc.).
- Way of influencing major decisions at the national level.
- Method for giving legitimacy to political parties, in the face of public mistrust.

National dialogue is a gradual process that produces long- and short-term results, through the clear and active involvement of political parties, but without letting them monopolize the forum. The processes allow for broad discussion of the issues within society, and facilitate subsequent government action.

How dialogue arises

A process of dialogue can originate from the need to reach an agreement on how to start rebuilding a society that has been divided by, for example, armed conflict. It can also begin as an effort to construct a national strategy with a shared vision of the future; or to overcome a situation of political impasse by building consensus.

Dialogue can also arise from situations of crisis or profound change that demand rapprochement and understanding among the parties, or in the face of growing demands from civil society, whether for solutions or for opportunities for participation.

What are the origins and causes of dialogue processes:

1. A first cause that can give rise to dialogue may be found in the crisis of democratic institutions. Twenty years after the third wave of democratization began in Latin America, one of the great challenges for consolidating democracy is the institutional deficit, and the ensuing low credibility of governmental and legislative decision-making processes. In

addition to the crisis of representativeness evident today in Latin America, there has been a failure to develop adequate institutions that reflect rules of behavior in a democratic society. Successful institutions are not only essential for the proper functioning of the political system,

While the ideas may vary from one context to another, it is clear that all agree on the notion of dialogue as bringing the citizenry closer to the decision-making process.

but for the economy. Without sound institutions, there can be no propitious economic environment or a solid democracy.

2. *On the other hand, the crisis of representation is another reason for initiating dialogue.* In a democracy, the government is the basic organ focusing on issues of national concern, as its basic mandate is to resolve the contradictions that arise in society. Arbitrating and concerting the will and interests of the people to make progress is how democracies normally manage themselves and take decisions. At the legislative level, normal practice in the majority of democracies has been to seek agreement or consensus in Parliament when taking fundamental decisions. The phenomenon of consensus-building, in the new dimension we see today, arises essentially as a result of the crisis of representation and of the problems of governance that we find in incipient and mature democracies of today. Parliaments are facing a great challenge: they must listen to the voice of civil society, with its demands from the bottom up; many realize that they have been left behind, and that the situation is becoming increasingly critical. Legislative bodies need to restore their credibility and legitimacy, or run the risk that forces will emerge to subvert the democratic process and weaken or destroy its institutions.

3. *The crisis of governance.* This arises essentially through the generalized discredit that the political class in Latin America has suffered, and because existing political parties have to some extent lost the capacity to channel all the options and concerns of society. Once this umbilical cord of communication and representation between parties and citizenry is cut, we find the phenomenon of exclusion and despair with respect to politics: certain groups become apathetic when they see that their ideas are not taken into account, and there is the danger that they will turn into fundamentalists opposed to the very system.

In response to this crisis of governance, there has been a growing tendency towards political reform that seeks, in some way, to transform the exercise of power and the traditional formulas for representation and political participation. This tendency seeks to strengthen local (regional and municipal) governments and to ensure greater citizen participation in community politics and development. It is at this point that dialogue arises as a mechanism for participation and consultation.

4. *Dialogue may arise, as well, in response to an impasse in society.* It is impossible to achieve the majorities necessary to take decisions in the legislature in a society that is divided into more or less equal groups, in terms of their political weight and representation, and with irreconcilable positions. This means that the country has no capacity to take decisions on fundamental issues, because of a reciprocal impasse that neutralizes political forces. When the Congress is in such a situation, the government is necessarily obliged to build political alliances in order to win the votes needed to approve any draft legislation.

The need for political parties to agree to make governance possible is at the very core of the concept of governance. Governance must be built through participation. Consensus-building to make the system stable and governable becomes impossible when political parties are unable to meet demands. The fundamental political mandate will not be enough in a two-party system where, for example, one party has gained power with a slim margin of votes, but where society is divided into three classes. This will not produce a mandate sufficient to bring about change, which means that the social basis of the mandate must be broadened. Yet broadening the social basis must not compromise democracy, rather strengthen it.

There is a widely accepted idea that dialogue is necessary for progress. People participate, not in order to support the government and political parties, but because dialogue is seen as a way to resolve conflicts and move a country forward.

5. Dialogue has become an indispensable requirement for coexistence and sustainable development for democratic countries seeking to foster human development. A commitment to—or compromise through—dialogue is vital for the health of democracy, because it is simply impossible to expect that all sectors and players will agree on everything.

6. A modern State must foster the integration and participation of the local population in national development, while at the same time promoting social control or auditing of government management, as an indispensable element for the transparency and efficiency of public management.

7. Given the nature of a democratic system, governments are transitory, thus it is important to establish mechanisms and instruments to protect consensus-based decisions and make them irreversible so as to allow society to continue to use this mechanism to resolve its remaining challenges.

8. Traditionally, economic development was a process governed by technocratic criteria, essentially through a decision-making process in which citizen participation was not considered an essential element. The objective was to achieve results, and so the emphasis was on outcomes, not on processes to achieve these outcomes. Currently, while results continue to be important, we recognize the overriding importance of the process, i.e. how agreements are reached and decisions are taken. Hence the importance of ensuring that processes are inclusive, not only for strengthening citizen ownership in the decision-making process, but for ensuring real citizen ownership over public management.

It is important to create a forum for citizen participation as soon as people's mistrust of power and institutions is perceived. It is essential to create a new atmosphere to restore trust through participation.

9. Participation and commitment by the principal political forces is essential to generating trust, particularly in societies that are deeply divided or polarized Dialogue drives democracy in countries that have no democratic tradition. On the other hand, in democratic countries, the crisis of representation in political parties has driven the public to reclaim areas of participation, beyond any agreements that parties may strike among themselves.

It seems that the citizenry and the various social sectors, faced with the weaknesses of the political class in political parties, are tending to draw together and take a proactive role, building a broad social fabric in order to put forward a new national agenda in place of relying on the traditional political structure.

10. Dialogue can arise from the need to institutionalize the participation of civil society. It is important to seek mechanisms, both formal and informal, to allow participation by civil society in ways that go beyond the electoral process, and that are not limited to crisis situations. This creates the challenge of striking a proper balance between representative democracy and participatory democracy. In this scenario, dialogue poses an additional challenge: to what extent, if at all, can or should we institutionalize dialogue in a formal way, so that dialogue will

serve not only as a process for generating public policies but as a system of checks and balances, involving social audit of public management?

Modalities

There is no single model for national dialogue.

As a result of the fertile exchange of experiences that took place in San Salvador, it was concluded that we should not speak of a national dialogue model, but rather, the modalities. Consequently, we cannot say that one specific modality of dialogue, developed and applied in one country, will necessarily meet the problems of another country, because obviously the contexts, the actors, the dynamics and the objectives pursued will be different.

From the discussions, we may derive different modalities for dialogue:

1. Given the nature of dialogue, it can either be seen as consultation or action. Dialogue as consultation is mainly a response to a particular circumstance, emergency or pressure. Dialogue as action, on the other hand, is longer in duration, since action requires more time and more mechanisms for monitoring, and control and evaluation to verify that the agreements have been fulfilled. In this way, dialogue as action tends to become institutionalized. In any case, we must point out that monitoring, verification and evaluation can be done either by official bodies or by civil society, without the need for a formal institution. A compliance timetable can be established during the dialogue, with the appropriate sessions for analyzing progress.

2. Another dimension is that of dialogue as a post-conflict instrument. In a post-conflict situation, peace must be consolidated and various aspects of national life must be reconstructed. Dialogue makes it possible to gather differing opinions from people, and to create a shared vision of the future, which must be the basis for any common approach to integral development. In this respect, we can point to the case of El Salvador, where the national dialogue has been and remains fundamental to the country's physical and institutional reconstruction.

3. Dialogue can be led by an organization appointed by the government, with specialized working groups, in which intellectuals and professionals can identify obstacles and propose alternative solutions to strategic development problems. This is followed by a major effort at consultation, participation and dialogue with people from all corners and social strata of the country.

Dialogue that begins from below

The country's most important labor unions and some of its business organizations are undertaking a bilateral dialogue, without government involvement and without the political parties. The intent is that both sectors, labor and business, should reach consensus on an agenda and present it to civil society as an agreement reached between the productive sectors (labor and management), and suggest that society take account of what these groups think, and what changes that they deem necessary for the development of democracy.

The objective of this type of dialogue is to design a national action plan (a design for a national development strategy). While the organization directing these tasks is appointed by the government, it is not part of the government.

"In the case of El Salvador, the Peace Accords are absolutely specific, and the country's broader problems are not at issue. The objective was to encourage reforms targeted strictly at political power: an in-depth reform of the armed forces; creation of institutions that would allow democracy to begin functioning, such as an honest police force, a National Ombudsman or Defender of Human Rights, major reform to the judiciary, and reintegration of the FMLN in political life."

El Salvador

The *modus operandi* is to produce a document with strategic and programmatic definitions, normally based on guidelines for the national action plan, which subsequently—during the first round of consultations—will be submitted to the major parties for their views. A second step involves submitting a document to citizen roundtables, by putting together groups of community leaders. The results are then compared with the analysis performed in the specialized working groups composed of national experts.

At this point, these lead organizations try to convert all the collected information into something concrete. The resulting draft is presented to public opinion by the President of the Republic, the chairs of the branches of government, the political parties and the local authorities. This is a process that is intimately linked with grass-roots participation, where the resulting plan reflects a real exercise of consultation with the citizens.

National Dialogue in Bolivia

<http://www.dialogolcp.gov.bo>

From the local administrative and political unit, we moved progressively upwards through intermediate levels, to the national government. The various dialogue roundtables dealt essentially with the same issues, but at each level the kinds of participants were different, depending on the community organization and the territorial scope of the administrative unit. In this way, depending on the case, we had representatives from the municipalities, the provinces, the departments, civil society organizations, parliamentarians, participants in other dialogues, and the national government, all involved.

After the consultations at the local level (municipal and departmental roundtables), the object was to organize a national dialogue roundtable, with an agenda of national scope.

The working roundtables were constituted by sectors. They worked on the top priorities identified by each sector nationally. In the end, from a long list of potential measures or activities identified in the various roundtables, they produced a small number of duly prioritized and scheduled actions to be taken.

The national roundtable involved representatives of the government, local authorities and the rest of civil society. It discussed issues of national importance and scope, identified and systematized in the working roundtables.

In this process, the government had to provide an advance list of its representatives by sector, in order to demonstrate its commitment. A preparatory meeting was held, in which the agenda for the national roundtable was laid out, and this was subsequently sent to the government. In this way, government representatives were able to come with answers to many of the concerns posed during the working roundtables.

At the sectoral level, this type of instrument involves dialogue by the government with the productive sectors, in order to deal with concrete proposals in key areas and issues, such as:

- Priorities for public investment and financing.
- Establishing a road conservation fund.
- Issuing a new tax code.
- Trade and agriculture policy.
- Housing policy.
- National policy for small and medium-size businesses.
- Free zone policy.
- Diversification of financial instruments.
- Training of human resources.
- Urban transport policy.

The outcome has the following features: specific agreements on the development of each region of the country, taking into account its nature; the relationship between the different segments of society, government and local administration throughout the country; and all municipalities must get together to directly manage and promote cooperation among local administrations. The resulting actions will be able to improve the quality of life without altering people's *modus vivendi* or the environment, since these elements were taken into account, as a result of the consultations.

4. Another experiment with dialogue noted during the roundtable was that of the “dialogue roundtables at the local administrative division level”. From the local administrative and political unit, they moved progressively upwards through intermediate levels to the national government. The various dialogue roundtables dealt essentially with the same issues, but at each level the kinds of participants were different, depending on the community organization and the territorial scope of the administrative unit. In this way, depending on the case, there were representatives from the municipalities, the provinces, the departments, civil society organizations, parliamentarians, participants in other dialogues, and the national government.

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The Process of National Consensus-Building in Costa Rica

<http://www.mideplan.go.cr/Concertacion/index.html>

On the basis of a platform worked out prior to the elections, through wide-ranging consultation with party militants, two broad forums were established after gaining power: one with the business sector, and the other with the social sectors. Views on this platform were collected from both forums: opinions about the proposals, shortcomings, merits and additional points, among other aspects relating to development.

With the information collected, a sectoral matrix was prepared which attempted to identify key points of development among the economic and social sectors. On the basis of this matrix, we were able to put together a well-balanced national agenda, underlying which was the problem of the neutralization of political forces (political impasse). We then had to construct a shared vision of the future and organize a wide-ranging process of national consensus-building in order to establish this vision of the future. We asked for technical support from country's universities, for two primary reasons: to give the process credibility, and to take advantage of the technical information available in the universities, so that all participants could work with uniform statistics on the national reality.

We held about 60 preparatory meetings to work out the potential thematic agenda, and the consensus-building procedures.

We arrived at the conclusion that the principal players in consensus-building are business people/entrepreneurs, workers, and government. We felt that the other sectors represented specific interests, particular visions of the world, but that they had no economic responsibility to pay the bill for the outcome of that situation.

The creation of a Consensus-Building Forum was recommended, consisting of government, business and workers, alongside a Civil Society Forum, of an advisory nature. In this forum, the relative weight of representation was considered unimportant, because it was a consultation forum that was to discuss and give its opinion on various issues.

It is important to note that some sectors may insist on having the right to make themselves heard, but will not be willing to participate actively and take responsibility for resolving fundamental issues. This consideration lay behind the idea of a system with a Civil Society Forum, with advisory powers, and a Consensus-Building Forum that could take decisions.

In terms of operations, a Coordination Committee was constituted, supported by a Board of Mediators (dignitaries and the Church) whose task it was to seek consensus on key agenda items where no agreement could be reached.

Other bodies included an Executive Secretariat that was the central focus of work for the two forums (Consensus-Building Forum and Civil Society Forum) and a Commission of Verification and Monitoring for the accords.

It was established, as part of the scheme, that any agreements reached would have to be translated by the government into draft legislation, for submission to the Legislature.

Principles of Dialogue:

Throughout the roundtable, certain ideas were put forth repeatedly that, by their nature, could be considered as principles for a process of dialogue. Those principles would be applied, depending on their nature, both at the design stage and during the national dialogue itself. Following is a list of proposals (to which there will no doubt be exceptions in specific cases), that by no means exhausts the options to be considered as principles for process of dialogue.

1. The government must be committed to the process.
2. It is essential to reconcile “*de jure* representation” (Congresses) with “*de facto* representation” (participatory and inclusive forums of dialogue). We have to determine what are the strengths and weaknesses of each option.
3. Developing a sense of citizen ownership requires participation by the government, the elected authorities, civil society and its organizations, the private sector and, where relevant, external players who can play a significant role in facilitating the dialogue and eventually in providing financial support. In fact, even where democracy and development are universal values or aspirations, the sense of citizen ownership over them can be strengthened through dialogue.
4. Constancy and perseverance are crucial for the success of the process.
5. Dialogue must be open to the possibilities of negotiation. Players’ commitment to the dialogue is vital for the health of the process, [since] it is simply impossible for all sectors and players to agree on everything.
6. Political commitments must be pinned down. People do not believe in the “good will” of the parties seated at the table—they believe in political interests and negotiation. There is no point in conducting an exercise around the table, and having it result in nothing.
7. A dialogue process must extend beyond the life of [the current] government. The agreements and outcomes from a national dialogue must extend beyond the mandate of any government, in order to avoid interruptions when there is a change of government.
8. The process must be endowed with an institutional memory and continuity. Unfortunately, experience tends to be lost with each change of government.
9. It is essential that players have the capacity to think beyond the boundaries of politics.
10. There must not only be room for media participation, but also a commitment from the media:
 - (a) Citizen participation through “public opinion” (which exerts pressure on institutions) represents a participatory dynamic that fosters the development of a sense of citizen ownership with respect to national reality and structures.

- (b) Public opinion is essential for the sustainability of the process, and for ensuring that the cleanup and reform of institutions will last.
11. Dialogue must be open to frank exchanges of opinions in order to have a meaningful debate and contribute to seeking agreement.
 12. Rather than inventing, we should take advantage of comparative experience. It is not strictly necessary to start from zero. We don't have to invent anything new, but rather to strengthen the country's existing institutions.
 13. Take advantage of local resources (professional experience and skills) to the maximum.
 14. Mechanisms for controlling and monitoring the dialogue are essential for the sustainability of the process.
 15. Another key to the sustainability of the process is to involve new generations in the discussion of public policies.
 16. Any dialogue must be based on reliable information. One of the great problems with Latin American dialogues is that everyone in the debate uses his own figures and his own facts, and the dialogue is distorted. If we do not even have a solid basis for discussion, it is very difficult to establish any kind of analysis.
 17. The scope within which we are seeking to build consensus, and the political value that it will have must be defined in advance. If we pretend that by building consensus in a manner parallel to Congress we are going to produce solutions, we will end up with a political crisis of dual legitimacy—a sociological legitimacy, in the form of public consensus, that places itself against the political legitimacy that resides in Congress.
 18. The agenda must be very carefully structured. A poorly-constructed agenda will only lead to conflicts. There are some issues that cause polarization. The idea is to have a comprehensive agenda that allows the forum to move forward gradually. There are some issues that simply cannot be avoided, but if they are placed on the agenda at the outset, they will lead to the radicalization of postures during the debate.
 19. It is important not to change the rules of the game unilaterally in the middle of the process.
 20. How dissent is going to be handled must be clearly established.
 21. The process must set realistic limits, and must not be too ambitious.



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22. The methodological structure must be clear and simple, and readily understandable.
23. Form is important. If a process under a certain name has failed, it is better not to use the same name next time around. Sometimes form can create real problems in people's minds.
24. The process must produce concrete results. Expectations about the results should not be overblown. They should be cautious and realistic.
25. Procedures for taking decisions and implementing agreements must be defined in advance. It is equally important that agreements be reached.
26. It is important to give the process public credibility in the eyes of the players involved, and of society in general.
27. It is important that the political opposition participate in the dialogue from the outset.
28. It is important to take into account the natural community organization, i.e., its existing structures, where these exist. They need to be identified, strengthened and involved in the joint work.
29. When discussing visions of the future, it is important to take into account local visions of the future. What do people think? How are they thinking?
30. The process should be practical rather than philosophical. The resources needed to achieve the objectives and reforms proposed should be identified early in the process.
31. The dialogue should be aimed squarely at overcoming problems. Dialogue without results is worthless.
32. Participants must be imbued with the concept of shared responsibility. It is very easy to leave everything to the government.
33. In the case of armed conflicts, what is needed is not so much dialogue among the combatants (armed conflict/civil war), but rather, a general dialogue with all of society, in order to define new terms of peace.
34. Participation by international players should be agreed to in advance by society.

Key factors for this process:

- Who will convene it and how?
- Clarity in the rules of the game.
- How will representation in the process be defined?
- How will the relative degrees of representation of different sectors be defined?
- Negotiating and structuring the agenda.

Players:

Deciding who the players are in a dialogue process is fundamental to its success, and particularly to the sustainability and validity of the agreements reached. In this area, once again, the roundtable revealed a variety of opinions and considerations that enter into play when it comes to making this determination.

In some cases, friendly countries and international agencies have played a key role for guaranteeing and demonstrating a willingness to lay the foundations of a new democracy and respect for the rule of law, with new concepts and new institutions for facing new challenges.

Among the players most frequently cited as essential in the process of national dialogue are:

- National government
- Local government
- Political parties
- Labor organizations
- Civil society
- Universities
- The Church
- International players



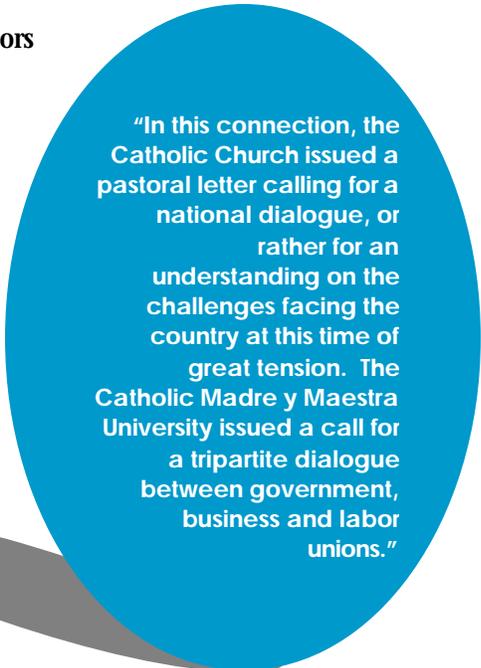
The government
Local governments
Political parties
Labor organizations
Civil society
Universities
The Church
International players

There were many references during the roundtable to the crisis of representation, as one of the reasons leading to national dialogue. In particular, national dialogue was regarded as providing an opportunity for society's most vulnerable groups—who feel that they are not represented in formal democratic institutions—to put forward their demands.

Some participants suggested that these vulnerable groups or sectors under some circumstances are not part of the problem under discussion, but rather are victims of that problem, (as was said to be the case in Colombian civil society) and should be given an active and direct voice, without having other political or civic groups speak for them or look out for their interests.

We have included participation by international players as one of the principles of national dialogue. Such participation, however, must be accepted by society in advance, and not imposed as a condition of external assistance.

In the case of international development agencies, while the methodology of promoting dialogue is something new for them, their standards and suggestions have sometimes inspired efforts at national dialogue. In other cases, it was their support that has made the process possible.



"In this connection, the Catholic Church issued a pastoral letter calling for a national dialogue, or rather for an understanding on the challenges facing the country at this time of great tension. The Catholic Madre y Maestra University issued a call for a tripartite dialogue between government, business and labor unions."

If the international community is to participate explicitly in the process, and not merely as a source of funding, it is important to make clear just what society as a whole demands and expects of them in constructing the agenda for the future.

The Overall Outcome:

We have drawn a few ideas that demonstrate the complexity and the importance of national dialogue in promoting development and in strengthening democracy from the exchange of experiences that took place during the roundtable.

“The process must go beyond simply producing nice documents that no one will ever read and, what is worse, no one will ever implement.”

In the first place, we may reiterate that the articulation of a national dialogue, as a process, poses critical problems of definition.

As one fundamental element, participants identified the point of departure for the dialogue, i.e., how should the process be launched. In some cases, including those of Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic (with due regard to the differences between them), the initial dialogue responded not only to a specific set of national circumstances, but to international support and motivation. In other cases, such as Costa Rica, the process was driven by the national government and conducted by national players in an effort to deal with the situation of virtual political impasse in the legislature, which made it essential to seek political negotiation and to broaden the social base of the government.

Although Mexico has not yet had any experience with national dialogue, it sees national dialogue as an essential element in any national strategic planning system. In the case of Peru, the initiative came primarily from civil society organizations. In these latter cases, the role of international agencies has been much less important than in the cases of Bolivia, El Salvador, Guatemala and the Dominican Republic.

“One of the positive outcomes of a national dialogue must surely be the strengthening of democracy and of its institutions. If the dialogue process ends up undermining the democratic system, its results will be harmful.”

Among those situations where international participation has fostered dialogue we can also cite Guyana, where a research foundation, not international participation, supported and facilitated the process. This brief survey illustrates, but by no means exhausts, the wide variety of factors that can generate or facilitate national dialogue.

The origin or point of departure for any dialogue is closely linked with the role of the various players and, in turn, the strengths and weaknesses that they bring with them. It was agreed, in general terms, that what is important is that the dialogue be consistent from the outset, if it is to be able to resist (as far as possible) the pressures and internal dynamics of a process of this nature, and to survive changes of government over the longer term.

In evaluating the relevance and importance of a national dialogue, it is important to distinguish the conditions or situations that motivate it from the people who convene and actually run it.

For example, in Bolivia's case the social, political and economic situation was so complicated that the process attracted support from the international community, which provided the resources to conduct it in a technically responsible and comprehensive way. Nevertheless, the international community did not play a decisive role in articulating the dialogue, but rather supported local players, who retained the initiative at all times.

"At the beginning of the dialogue, everyone arrived at the table with his own proposals, data, expectations and facts. Every party waited anxiously to see what others would bring to the dialogue. What was hard was to realize that, if we were to make progress, we would have to dialogue and focus on our common interest in achieving our country's development. In this way, we were able to achieve highly positive results."

Bolivia

As will be appreciated from the sections referring to the principles and modalities of the dialogue process, and as the case of Bolivia illustrates, there are many variables that must be taken into consideration, and consequently, many options for articulating a national dialogue. In this respect—in addition to those general principles of dialogue—we must take account the context, the democratic tradition, the needs and priorities of a particular country, and the purpose being pursued.

As mentioned repeatedly during the roundtable, putting together a dialogue is a delicate and complex task, the design of which must take into consideration the different boundaries or stages that the dialogue may pass through as the situation evolves. We may say that "dialogue as mechanism" is the first part of the process. First dialogue, then negotiation, and finally consensus-building for action. We must understand the process in stages, and although the boundaries between them may not be very explicit, it is essential to lay down the objectives of each stage as clearly as possible, so that if the methodology or the players change, the dialogue can continue towards its fundamental goal.

One important methodological precaution that was noted during the roundtable is that it is important to design a process that will point the way to potential negotiation, consensus-building and ultimately, of course, action. With this objective in mind, it is a good idea to establish explicit "performance indicators", so that all participants can judge the degree of progress that is being made as the process advances.

The dialogue must continue to mature until it reaches a point where negotiation is possible and where explicit agreements can be proposed and achieved, before moving on to the third phase, consensus-building (execution agreements) and putting the agreements into effect (with time schedules and responsibilities assigned).

While dialogues are exercises in participation and interchange, it is wise to remember that not all dialogues will automatically lead to negotiation and consensus for action. Given the variety of approaches that were put forth during the roundtable, we may conclude that national dialogues (or whatever they may be called in each case) are here to stay as alternative channels of participation, and that the challenge lies in incorporating them and making them an integral part of these formal procedures, and in this way strengthening democracy and promoting country development.

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