

National Dialogue Handbook

A Guide for Practitioners

Executive Summary

The background

Over the last decade, National Dialogues have come to be seen as a critical tool for the prevention of violent escalation and for managing political crisis and transitions. While they may be widely discussed among national governments, opposition parties, civil society groups and armed movements, as well as in international policy, practitioner, diplomatic and donor circles, their popularity has to date not been matched by conceptual clarity. Few resources exist to offer sound and grounded guidance and practical support for those who are exploring National Dialogue as a possible way to move beyond political deadlocks, divisive conflict scenarios, or tumultuous periods of transition.

Grounded in a series of contemporary case studies, this Handbook aims to contribute to the nascent debate about National Dialogue, bringing together insights and expertise from diverse regions. The purpose of the Handbook is twofold: (1) to offer an analytical framework of National Dialogues and (2) to serve as a practical tool for those engaged in the implementation of these processes. It also addresses the role of external actors and how they can best support National Dialogue processes, but it is focused primarily on those who are in the driver's seat when it comes to decisions on the design, conduct and implementation of National Dialogue processes.

The concept

National Dialogues are 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. Depending on the context, National Dialogues can be employed as mechanisms for (a) **crisis prevention and management**, a shorter-term endeavour, undertaken strategically as a means to resolve or prevent the outbreak of armed violence, breaking political deadlocks and re-establishing minimal political consensus (e.g. Tunisia); or (b) **fundamental change, with a longer-term trajectory**, envisioned as a means to redefine state-society relations, or establish a new 'social contract' through institutional and constitutional changes (e.g. Yemen).

National Dialogues are only *one* way to address political crises and violent conflicts and guide change processes, alongside other mechanisms for conflict transformation, such as mediation and negotiation. The demarcating features of National Dialogues are its process (instead of outcome) orientation, its level and span of participation (connecting different layers of society), and its national organization and facilitation (external actors focusing only on support functions). In practice, nonetheless, any sustainable solution is likely to require a combination of context-specific methods and processes. A National Dialogue process can in practice move through a mediated preparation phase and fall back on heavy negotiations during key political moments. Moreover, it can take place before, after or in parallel to a negotiated or mediated process.



From concept to practice: process design options and practical considerations

Each National Dialogue will develop its unique structure corresponding to the highly context-specific needs and aim of each process. However, similarities can be detected as National Dialogue structures tend to respond to a core set of functions (..... *National Dialogue Framework, p. 5*). For the purpose of clarity, the

Handbook distinguishes between the different phases (preparation, process and implementation) and clearly allocates the corresponding institutions. In practice, however, the transition from one phase to another is often fluid, non-linear and often interrupted and reinitiated.

PREPARATION PHASE

The preparation phase often constitutes a mini-negotiation process in itself. It is a time of negotiating beneficial framings for the process, as well as the relationship between the parties who will be ultimately deciding the feasibility of addressing the conflict through peaceful, political and dialogue-based means. Despite the prevalence of political bargaining, the technical aspects related to this phase are significant and have implications for the later process. Before the National Dialogue can be put in motion, the preparatory process will need to be developed and

agreed upon, often with a comprehensive institutional infrastructure of its own. Key tasks during this phase include (1) setting the mandate, including clarifying aims, objectives and scope of the process; (2) preparing the process and the people; and (3) building confidence. The choice of preparatory format is mostly determined by the aim of the process, the resources available, and the interests of the main stakeholders. Ideally, a working consensus should emerge on the central aim of the National Dialogue and key principles.

Key considerations

- ≡ **Being clear** on what National Dialogues can realistically achieve, as well as clearly embedding them in larger transition processes.
- ≡ **Ownership:** genuine engagement by the main stakeholders, broad consultations, and an inclusive preparatory mechanism foster legitimacy and ownership. National actors should be at the driving seat as far as the design and implementation of the National Dialogue process is concerned
- ≡ **Inclusivity:** the preparation phase should take into account the interest of a broad range of stakeholders, following an inclusive approach. There is a danger that main (government) parties exercise power over the preparatory institutions and subsequently “hijack” the entire process.
- ≡ **Clear mandate and objective:** it is important to be clear what the process is supposed to achieve (and what it is not). This informs adequate process design and supports expectation management.
- ≡ **Chair:** selecting the right chair for the preparation phase can be an important signal about the sincerity of the process in planning and can help to generate legitimacy.
- ≡ **Going slow to go fast:** the preparatory phase is more than the prelude to the process proper and should be planned and implemented with the same amount of care and consideration.
- ≡ **Institutions and mechanisms:** the function, mandate, chair and the decision-making mechanisms must be clearly outlined. The preparatory body would serve best when it is tasked to develop criteria for participation, options for agenda-setting, and options to break deadlocks during the process.
- ≡ **Importance of confidence-building measures:** often characterized by hard negotiations, this phase also provides unique opportunities for relationship- and trust-building if supported by confidence-building measures.



≡ **Resources:** National Dialogues require substantial financial and human resources. It is important to secure the support of major donor countries and international finance institutions. Equally important is to put viable funds disbursement structures in

place (i.e. trust funds). When a non-state armed actor is involved in the process, funds allocation for the group (for administration, logistics etc.) can become a political and a legal issue and has to be dealt with political sensitivity and care.

PROCESS PHASE

The process phase is the most public phase of a National Dialogue. The key steps, procedures and mechanisms related to this phase include:

Setting the agenda: the process of agenda setting – if managed in a transparent and inclusive manner – can provide further clarity on the nature of the National Dialogue, commit parties to the process and serve as an exercise in trust-building and generating a shared understanding of positions and vision.

Finding a trusted and credible convener: the choice of the convener is often a powerful signal as to what can be expected from the overall process. Choosing a credible and broadly accepted convener is a strong asset and insider mediators are often particularly well placed to play this vital role.

Determining size: there is no ideal size; rather this depends on the objective the process seeks to fulfil (crisis prevention/management versus fundamental change). Determining a process' size should be the result of weighing up options and working through dilemmas. However, rather than pitting managerial demands against an inclusive process design, the latter should be considered creatively considering different avenues for participation (direct, indirect, etc.).

Selecting participants: the selection of participants is often an elaborate multi-step approach and should be designed in a way that reflects the social make-up of a society related to the issue(s) to be addressed. Participant selection is one key instrument to ensure that National Dialogues are broad based and inclusive, with parties being included in a manner that reflects their standing in society (as opposed to all

parties having the same numbers of seats). Selection criteria and mechanisms must be coherent, fair and transparent (i.e. clearly communicated) to be perceived as legitimate.

Setting guiding principles and ground rules: procedural fairness is an important factor in generating legitimacy and clarity should exist about procedural rules, supporting the ability to monitor the process and participate effectively.

Developing decision-making and consensus-building modalities: decision-making in National Dialogues is usually based on consensus, which is often a tedious and precarious process. Most processes develop a multi-step approach and have built-in mechanisms to overcome. If practised well, it fosters legitimacy and a deep commitment by a wide range of actors to the process and its outcomes.

Engaging the public: ensuring that the process will be carried by society at large necessitates public outreach and consultation. Being able to follow the process and to provide input at different stages increases public support and buy-in. Importantly, mechanisms must be devised to meaningfully feed the input back into the process.

Creating support structures, deadlock-breaking mechanisms and safety nets: these structures are specifically designed to help overcome deadlocks and stalemates and to keep the central negotiation and dialogue process on track. It is important to draw on national traditional practices and resources that have been used to reach consensus and break deadlocks.



IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

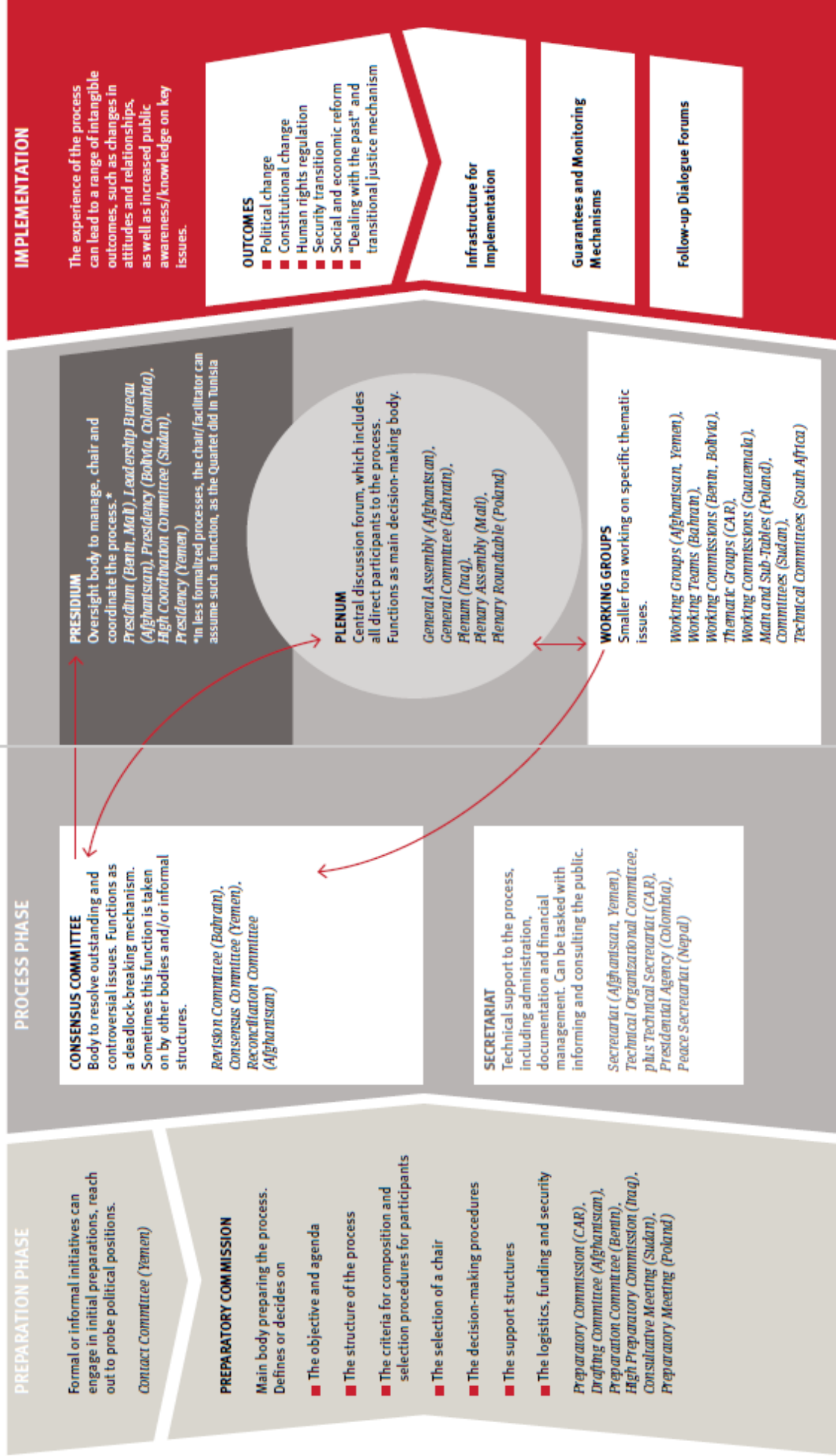
A range of outcomes is likely to result from the process phase of a National Dialogue. These include **intangible** (relationship building, civic education, etc.) and **tangible** (political and constitutional change, etc.) outcomes alike. The proper implementation of tangible outcomes is as important as the process for reaching them. It might only be at this point that the quality of and commitment to what has been agreed becomes visible. While the immediate outcomes of a National Dialogue tend to be similar to agreements attained through ceasefire negotiations or mediation processes, the process for arriving at the agreement is usually different. National Dialogues are self-organized and self-facilitated processes based on a set of principles that ideally continue to take effect be-

yond the closing ceremony. Moreover, participating in a consensus-oriented process can be a powerful experience. The inclusion of a larger set of people than is usual for ceasefire or mediation processes will also need to be considered during this phase: people will want to see their contributions continue to pay off during the implementation phase. The implementation phase can be facilitated by different mechanisms, including (1) infrastructure for implementation; (2) guarantees and monitoring mechanisms; and (3) follow-up dialogue forums. Continuing with the spirit of the process and designing the implementation phase in an inclusive and participatory manner can further support thorough implementation and strengthen change processes.

Key considerations

- ≡ **It is crucial to manage expectations** and not be over-ambitious about National Dialogues. A National Dialogue should be judged not only from its tangible outcomes but also by reflecting on the process as a whole. Moreover, successful implementation of immediate measures for short-term outcomes should not lead to taking things for granted, but rather pave the way for more comprehensive implementation enabling fundamental change.
- ≡ The process arriving at an outcome is as important as – and directly impacts upon – the quality of an outcome. Useful in the case of National Dialogues is that **participants strive towards reaching agreements by consensus**, with the inclusion and participation of all relevant actors. This in turn can facilitate broad support for the agreement from the outset and increase the likelihood of successful implementation. Another factor aiding implementation is when agreements have reached above the level of the lowest common denominator to actually address deep-seated grievances.
- ≡ Notwithstanding all the planning and preparation that goes into a National Dialogue process, it is helpful, especially in the implementation phase, to **ensure that it does not become a plan-driven process**, but rather a change driven/ transformative process. It is important to have a clear calendar with steps for implementation (with strict but realistic deadlines), but always with a degree of flexibility.
- ≡ While ‘constructive ambiguity’ may be helpful at certain times, **implementing mechanisms and bodies rely on clear language** in the recommendations or agreements. Additionally, incomplete agreements need follow-up processes to ensure they do not get side-lined or lost, hampering in turn the implementation of other agreements.
- ≡ Ideally, the implementation phase of a National Dialogue should not be about ‘closing down’ but rather **‘opening up’ the space for continuous dialogue at multiple levels** (for example, nationally and informally among the dialogue participants). For a sustainable structure, the concept of Infrastructures for Peace (I4P) may be worth considering.

National Dialogue Framework



External engagement

Being nationally owned and led does not mean that National Dialogues processes are not exposed to the influence of external elements, conditions, and actors. External/international actors play a range of roles in National Dialogue processes. As **enabler**, they build support for a National Dialogue at the international level, bring their influence to bear on conflict parties, nudge them towards dialogue with the other side, and encourage parties to engage (e.g. Group of Eight in Guatemala). This may involve a mixture of incentives (debt relief, assistance packages) and pressure ('smart' sanctions, embargos). As **funder**, they provide financial resources for the conduct of a National Dialogue process directly (Yemen) or indirectly through a local mechanism that supports the political process (Nepal). As **observer**, they are present during the process, without taking an active role, acting as witnesses, ensuring international support of the process, creating a conducive environment for rapprochement and for negotiations based on trust between the sides. As **guarantor**, they act as a guardian, giving their commitment and lending political support to a National Dialogue process and the implementation of outcomes. In contexts where parties have little trust, external actors' involvement as observers or guarantors can help to build confidence and alleviate the perceived risk of engaging in a process for the parties. Since these roles requires leverage, they are often fulfilled by influential states or international and regional organizations (e.g. the UN

in Guatemala; Qatar and the Arab League in Lebanon).

As **providers of technical and expert support**, they provide thematic inputs on specific areas (process design, power-sharing, etc.), skills-training and comparative expertise, facilitation of consultation meetings among different National Dialogue participants or between external experts and participants (e.g. UNDP in Jordan; the Swiss in Nepal). As **facilitator** on the margin, they act as go-betweens and help to build trust or resolve specific issues in the process, often by bringing the participants together on an informal basis, allowing them to explore options in a way that would not be possible in an official setting (e.g UN in Libya; AU in Sudan). Last but not least, as **implementer, monitor** and **verifier**, they are responsible for helping to translate into practice or to oversee outcomes that have resulted from a National Dialogue. This function is mostly executed by regional or international organizations (World Bank in Yemen; Panel of Eminent African Personalities in Kenya), but often complemented by local civil society monitoring organizations and networks, as they are embedded in the context and can reach the most remote places.

Depending on the nature of an external actor, it being a political or development actor, the more specific functions may be discerned, as per the phase of the National Dialogue process:

	Political actors	Development actors
Preparation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Set incentives and build political support ≡ Reach out to influential international and regional stakeholders to create a conducive environment ≡ Support trust- and relationship-building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Set incentives through funding provision/restriction ≡ Build capacity of groups advocating for the inclusion of a development agenda into the process ≡ Support trust- and relationship-building ≡ Support public information campaigns at the grassroots
Process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Provide thematic and process expertise ≡ Create trustworthy environment by acting as observer or guarantor ≡ Ensure international support ≡ Facilitate side meetings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ≡ Fund infrastructures ≡ Provide technical support, e. g. to working groups dealing with development issues ≡ Provide social and economic data and conduct related fragility assessments



Implementation

- ≡ Monitor the implementation of outcomes
- ≡ Maintain international attention to support implementation of outcomes
- ≡ Support the setting up of stable institutions based on the outcomes

- ≡ Provide peace dividends by providing financial support for implementing outcomes
- ≡ Provide technical support for implementing outcomes
- ≡ Conduct post-conflict needs assessment

Key considerations

- ≡ Letting national stakeholders decide on the role of external actors.
- ≡ ‘Complementing’ the work of national stakeholders through close cooperation and alignment.
- ≡ Engaging in an impartial manner with all relevant national actors, for example when dealing with proscribed groups.
- ≡ Being respectful of local realities and value systems, even though these may not be at par with states’ and multilateral organizations’ norms and values.
- ≡ Not undermining the process with vested interests, to not lose credibility in the eyes of local stakeholders.
- ≡ Being flexible with funding, keeping in mind that transition phases often need long-term engagement and are likely to progress in a non-linear manner.
- ≡ Making funding decisions in consultation and with the involvement of national stakeholders, also to ensure that National Dialogues are not perceived as overly donor-reliant by the local population.
- ≡ Making use of mechanisms such as Groups of Friends and support groups, in order to alleviate coordination problems, which is a common problem in multi-stakeholder engagements in peace processes.
- ≡ Aligning strategic priorities and calibrating involvement to the needs of the nationals leading National Dialogues; taking a demand-driven and multi-partial approach (rather than a supply-driven and prescriptive one).

Parameters of a successful National Dialogue

Prerequisites: readiness to negotiate and engage with the other side and to do so with good faith; political will and a commitment to the process; a minimum level of ‘working trust’; a realistic assessment of the complexity of a National Dialogue and its chances of success in order to avoid unrealistic expectations, disappointment and ‘dialogue fatigue’; and the inclusion of civil society actors, women, youth and marginalized sections, as well as power-holders from the informal and traditional sectors.

International/regional actors: a minimum political consensus among relevant international and regional actors around supporting attempts at National Dialogue; consensus through ad hoc consultations or institutionalized form (contact groups, groups of friends, UN Security Council Resolution making explicit reference to National Dialogue).

Balance of power: mechanisms to deal with power asymmetries at the dialogue table; capacity-building measures to enhance the negotiation capacities of stakeholders who are less experienced in dialogue and negotiation.

Non-like-minded groups: a clear strategy to engage with hard-to-reach armed actors in order for them not to become spoilers later in the process, including military and proscribed groups.

Convener: informed selection of a person considered a legitimate and impartial actor by all sides.

Topics: nationally important and relevant issues that get to the very heart of the matters troubling that country at that time, but that are also realistic to address.

Capacity-building: enhancement of technical skills of insiders and negotiators through training and ca-



capacity-building in National Dialogue design, facilitation and negotiation, which also increases their confidence in conducting their own affairs without relying on outside assistance.

Exploration and preparation: nurturing the idea of National Dialogue in public and political circles alike; preparing conflict actors; seeking international or regional commitment and funds; and devising communication strategies.

Implementation: means to follow through on agreed outcomes, equipped with powers to hold parties ac-

countable; support of the international community for the implementation process with the necessary funds, expertise and smart sanctions if necessary.

Security guarantee: space to operate freely and autonomously without fearing political persecution; halting of ongoing violence, unbanning of opposition groups, ensuring media freedom.

Transition roadmap: parallel economic, structural, political and judicial reform processes; short-term humanitarian relief measures and economic stabilization programmes as peace dividends.

Dilemmas, trade-offs and open questions

National Dialogues are complex and demanding processes. They are essentially political in nature, often grounded in realpolitik, narrow personal interests and/or party political calculations. The same applies to regional and international powers, regardless whether they choose to be supportive, indifferent or hostile to National Dialogue processes. Moreover, political opposition groups and civil society across regions are weary of dialogue as too many attempts have not produced substantial results. This has led to cynicism about the potential of real dialogue, as well as the honesty with which it is being applied, leading to suspicion and ‘dialogue fatigue’. National Dialogues – or for that matter any negotiation process – are often ‘the continuation of conflict by other means’. They may be neither national nor dialogical and they are almost always imperfect mechanisms that fall short of an ideal type. Even if a ‘textbook process’ has been designed, conditions outside of the control of those conducting or supporting a process may lead to its breakdown, for example when regional powers intervene, global powers drop their support or the country turns into an arena of proxy war.

Conflict stakeholders as well as practitioners and donors should be aware of this at any stage to under-

take honest assessments of what is realistically possible within that context. These processes often tend to vacillate between *necessity* (what needs to happen in a given situation), *desirability* (what would ideally be possible), and *windows of opportunities* (what is possible) that present themselves. Furthermore, the need for a National Dialogue often means state-society relations are disrupted and dysfunctional, which in turn makes it especially hard to develop and maintain an effective dialogue process. Establishing trust and confidence in the government, its representatives and the institutions is a long-term process that endures beyond the National Dialogue itself.

While this Handbook suggests technical measures and options for designing and conducting National Dialogue processes, we are acutely aware of these dynamics and the very political nature of the undertaking and the many challenges this poses. Issues around decision-making, power asymmetries, the technocratic application of this tool, manipulation and politicization are some challenges in this regard that also remain unanswered in this Handbook. We understand this Handbook as a work in progress, inspiring further debate and contributing towards professionalization of this still very young field.



About the National Dialogue Handbook

The Handbook was produced in the framework of a two-year project (March 2015 – April 2017), implemented by the Berghof Foundation in cooperation with swisspeace. The project was funded by the German Federal Foreign Office in cooperation with the Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs. It has been developed based on an original and participatory research approach, primarily drawing on the experience of stakeholders and experts with first-hand experience in National Dialogues. The Berghof Foundation, in cooperation with swisspeace, has consolidated its extensive experience in supporting National Dialogues and other transition processes through a range of methods. These include detailed case studies of Guatemala, Lebanon, Libya, Mali, Nepal, Sudan, and Tunisia, which were

drafted by small teams of mainly local experts and insiders who were engaged first-hand in these processes. The detailed case studies were complemented by thematic studies, a comprehensive mapping exercise of National Dialogues and similar processes in different regions, active participation in expert consultations on National Dialogues and exchanges with the project's Advisory Group. International experts, technical teams and UN special advisors were also mobilized as part of the Advisory Group to critically reflect on the content of the Handbook, making sure it addresses the practical questions on the ground.

All publications developed in the context of this project can be accessed at: www.berghof-foundation.org/publications/national-dialogue-handbook.