

# National Dialogues at crossroads

A series



National Dialogues x **Protest Movements**

## About this paper

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A man lifts a pan with an image of Colombia's President Ivan Duque that reads "dialogue" during a protest march combined with concerts as a national strike continues in Medellin, Colombia Dec 22, 2019.

**Photo inside:** © Shutterstock.com | Sebastian Barros

Bogotá, Colombia– Dec 5, 2019: Bogotá's Popular Philharmonic Orchestra honenages the Indigenous Guard from Cauca, Colombia during the National Strike against Iván Duque's Government.

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# Preface

Over the last two decades, National Dialogues have been increasingly recognised as a comprehensive tool for preventing violent conflicts and reaching inclusive political settlements. As the practice has developed worldwide, conceptual expertise and process design support have expanded and professionalised, resulting in a number of publications, hands-on manuals and training materials on National Dialogues. In 2017, the Berghof Foundation and swisspeace published the *National Dialogue Handbook* to assist national stakeholders and international support actors in the preparation, conduct and implementation of National Dialogue processes. We define National Dialogues 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”. They enable a process-oriented dialogue among an inclusive group of representatives from various segments of society, and strive to achieve consensus-based decision-making. The timeframe of National Dialogues varies widely, from national conferences lasting a few days, to sustained and multi-level processes over several years.

Despite their promising features and potential benefits for inter-elite crisis management or inclusive structural reform, National Dialogues have also been critically reviewed and challenged for their limitations, especially when used by contested governments to (re) assert their power and legitimacy, or due to their poor track record on implementation. Furthermore, there are still many knowledge gaps when it comes to various substantive and procedural issues in National Dialogues. In our own engagement and interactions with conflict parties and stakeholders involved in or considering National Dialogue processes, we have observed their keen interest in learning from peers and experts from other contexts on how to best integrate certain topics in the design of National Dialogues, or how to meaningfully include specific societal groups.

In response to these identified gaps and practical requests, this paper series compiles lessons learned and recommendations on three cross-cutting issues (overlapping with the Berghof Foundation’s *Strategic Priorities for 2022-25*): climate change; digitalisation; and protest movements. Additional nexus areas will be explored in forthcoming papers, including a paper on National Dialogue x Transitional Justice and Dealing with the Past to be published in 2024. The series aims to systematise knowledge and experience of these nexus areas, which are generally under-explored; to illustrate them through various examples where National Dialogue processes have taken place; and to provide pointers for practitioners, to help them tailor strategies of external support and local engagement. The papers do not provide easy or definitive answers, but outline open questions, dilemmas and options to foster a constructive exchange in theory and practice.

These papers are written by recognised experts in their respective fields, drawing on their own previous research and personal experiences, in addition to secondary sources and (when possible) a small sample of interviews with key informants. Each study was also guided by a dedicated Advisory Group, formed by five to seven Berghof colleagues, peer-practitioners from other peacebuilding organisations, thematic experts and National Dialogue stakeholders (e.g. former delegates). The groups were convened twice, to inform the design and peer-review the drafting of the papers; we are deeply grateful for their contributions.

These studies will hopefully appeal to a broad readership. Readers who are expert or interested in National Dialogues will find inspiration on ways to integrate the nexus areas covered by the series, while thematic experts in the fields of protest movements, climate change, and digitalisation will gain new insights into the relevance and added value of National Dialogue processes as an inclusive format for multi-stakeholder consultation, consensus-building and decision-making.

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# 1. Introduction

In recent years, we have seen a surge in protests worldwide – from Lebanon, Sudan and Belarus to Venezuela, Hong Kong and the United States (Wright 2019; Chenoweth 2020). In most of these conflicts, the protest movements either win or are repressed and silenced by the government. A third option is to have a process of mediation or dialogue either specifically between the protesters and the government, or more broadly between different social actors and the government in the form of a National Dialogue.

However, dialogue efforts, including National Dialogues, can also be used by governments to buy time and shelve critical issues raised by protesters (Stephan 2020). For this reason, many leading activists often refuse to participate in National Dialogues. These are likely to be some of the contributory factors to National Dialogues having very limited success worldwide in terms of transforming conflicts involving protest movements. It is therefore of critical importance to find ways around this conundrum and ways to increase the likelihood of success in dialogue in tense protest situations.

Since National Dialogues gained prominence during the Arab Spring (Blunck et al. 2017), the interest in National Dialogues as tools to enable inclusive and broad participation in the face of political crises has increased. Recent literature has focused on the impact of specific National Dialogues, yet there has been limited research on the methodology, dynamics and workings of National Dialogues specifically in relation to protest movements. As stated by Beaujouan et al. (2020), “There is an extensive literature on what makes National Dialogues effective, not all of which is relevant to the particular context of social unrest”. This paper aims to do exactly that, identifying opportunities and best practices for including movements and their demands in National Dialogues.

It will map out the potential and challenges of National Dialogues in the context of social unrest, taking the Colombian National Dialogue from 2019 as its point of departure and drawing comparisons across additional cases. The paper builds on 12 interviews with participants in the ‘Peace with Legality’ section of the Colombian National Dialogue and draws on video recordings of meetings from this dialogue. It also builds on input from an Advisory Group, consisting of practitioners and activists who have participated in or worked with National Dialogues across the globe.

The paper investigates the design, process and outcomes of the Colombian National Dialogue and discusses how the Colombian case is symptomatic of many of the challenges in organising National Dialogues in a context of protests. The Colombian National Dialogue is a good example of the need for substantial government commitment, proper planning and meaningful inclusion of protesters. Moreover, lessons and challenges are mapped out across cases, identifying common patterns in terms of context, design and change brought about by the National Dialogues discussed here. Based on the single-case and cross-case mapping, the paper discusses the challenges of timing, momentum, compromise, inclusion of activists and post-dialogue engagement and concludes by synthesising the takeaways on the design, process and implementation of National Dialogues.

## 2. The National Dialogue x protest movements nexus

National Dialogues are increasingly recognised as political processes to guide political transitions in contexts of socio-political upheaval. They originally arose from the need to increase and protect national sovereignty in the face of growing scepticism regarding international interventions for conflict resolution (Blunck et al. 2017). Since the fall of the Soviet Union, similar processes have been used to address a range of issues related to political crises and transitions, including in contexts involving mass or popular uprisings, such as the ‘dialogue round tables’ format in Eastern Europe (Paffenholz et al. 2017) or the national conferences which ushered in democratic transitions in Francophone Africa during the early 1990s (Blunck et al. 2017). National Dialogues gained special prominence during the Arab Spring when several countries in the Middle East and North Africa organised dialogue processes with the objective of addressing generalised social discontent (Blunck et al. 2017). Since then, the interest in National Dialogues as tools that enable inclusive and broad participation in contexts of political crises or transitions has significantly increased.

Following the definition of National Dialogues provided in the Preface, they should be distinguished from citizen assemblies – where there is a predominant focus on using citizens’ input for policymaking – as the emphasis is on dialoguing or debating not only with other citizens but also with political elites. Likewise, National Dialogues should not be confused with formal constitutional processes such as Constituent Assemblies or traditional peace processes such as peace talks or reconciliation efforts. However, the terminology around National Dialogues may vary according to context, and some processes that would qualify as

National Dialogues in terms of being national in scope and mandate, addressing issues of national importance and having inclusive participation, have been qualified with distinct labels. For example, the cases referred to in this paper include the Great National Debate (Grand Débat National) in France (2019) and the Great National Conversation (Gran Conversación Nacional) in Colombia (2019). Whereas the term dialogue indicates a dialogical format of mutual exchange, the term ‘conversation’ indicates a somewhat less binding and engaged format and ‘debate’ indicates a more oppositional mode of engagement.<sup>1</sup> However, states initiating the processes do not necessarily mean to imply these connotations.

Although National Dialogues can be applied in many contexts, for example as part of implementing a peace agreement or to address a particular issue like climate change, they are particularly challenging but also potentially transformative in contexts where social movements demand change through peaceful protest tactics such as demonstrations, strikes, boycotts or symbolic/cultural forms of civil resistance. Social movements can include, but are not limited to, pro-democracy movements (such as those protesting closed political spaces or election fraud), human rights movements (representing particular marginalised/minority social groups), environmental movements (such as those protesting extractive industries or resource scarcity – see also paper on National Dialogues x Climate Change) and anti-corruption movements (calling for accountability and good governance). Protest movements may influence the course of National Dialogues either from within, if they are represented at the table, or from the outside, by mobilising through extra-institutional tactics such

1 See [www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/Dialogue%2Bvs%2BDebate%2B-%2BUSIP%2BGlobal%2BCampus.pdf](http://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/2017-01/Dialogue%2Bvs%2BDebate%2B-%2BUSIP%2BGlobal%2BCampus.pdf)

as street protest or online activism during National Dialogues.

Protest movements have worked as major catalysts for societal transformation but are frequently ignored during decision-making and negotiating processes, in part because of their decentralised structures (coalesced around loose alliances), dispersed leadership and perceived radicalism (Dudouet and Pinckney 2021). National Dialogues thus present an opportunity for social movements to be included in decision-making processes and obtain political concessions not only through pressuring a government with civil resistance but also through dialogical interaction. However, most National Dialogues initiated in contexts of social uprisings either do not have any direct participation by grass-roots activists, who become represented by political parties claiming to speak in their names, as was the case in Ukraine (2014) and Tunisia (2013), for example, or, alternatively, activists are invited alongside many other stakeholders, as in Yemen in 2013/2014 (Dudouet and Pinckney 2021). This paper will focus on the context of National Dialogues where protesters are included directly in the dialogue process along with other actors.

### 3. Case study: The Colombian National Dialogue as a response to social protests (2019–2020)

In November 2019, worker organisations in Colombia called for a general strike to protest the recently announced labour reforms and other issues such as corruption, privatisation, tariff increases and social unrest (AIL 2019). Central to the protests was also a plea for better implementation of the Havana peace agreement, signed in 2016. In late November and early December, hundreds of thousands of people from different sectors of society joined the protests in the streets of Bogotá. As a response to the demonstrations, on 24 November 2019, President Iván Duque called for a ‘Grand National Conversation’ (Gran Conversación Nacional) to begin immediately and extend until 15 March (Sánchez 2019). Based on the protesters’ demands, the government identified six themes for discussion: education, environment, growth with equality, youth, peace with legality, and the fight against corruption (Tamayo Gaviria 2020). However, leading activists from the National Strike Committee refused to participate in the dialogue, because it “was not summoned by the strike” (Barreto 2019).

By mid-March 2020, the Great National Conversation was brought to an end and opinions on its results were mixed (Tamayo Gaviria 2020). The government claimed success in that the conversation led to an acceleration of the Icetex reform, economic support for students, a decree to facilitate youth employment in the public sector, an incentive in the Law of Economic Growth expected to lead to 60,000 new jobs for young people, financing for rural roads, signing of the Escazú Agreement (Acuerdo de Escazú) to protect environmental leaders, and a programme to support 500,000 micro-projects. By the beginning of March 2020, however, the Strike Committee considered the

exercise a failure and called for new protests since most of their demands were not fulfilled (Tamayo Gaviria 2020). Nevertheless, facing a rise in the number of Covid cases, President Duque declared a National Emergency on 12 March 2020, two weeks before the planned protest was meant to take place (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social 2020a). This declaration and subsequent decisions required the suspension of any event involving more than 50 people and established the principle of ‘social distancing’ (Ministerio de Salud y Protección Social 2020a; 2020b). Both these measures led to the cancellation of new protests scheduled for 25 March (Tamayo Gaviria 2020). Given the national emergency, the National Conversation’s conclusion was also postponed and it was eventually cancelled altogether.

#### 3.1. Designing the National Dialogue

The mass character of the demonstrations in Colombia coupled with increasing tension between government forces, namely the Mobile Anti-Riot Squad (ESMAD), and protesters, led the government to seek an immediate, nonviolent response to the generalised social discontent. The experiences of mass protests turning violent in Ecuador, Chile and Bolivia pressured the government into acting fast. This sense of urgency seems key in understanding the rush with which the National Conversation was put into place. In fact, only three days passed from the first protest on 21 November 2019 to President Iván Duque’s call for a Great National Conversation on 24 November. Two days later (26 November) the

different themed groups started holding meetings in Casa de Nariño. In this sense, the National Dialogue was used more as an instrument of crisis management than as a tool for creating fundamental changes in society (Blunck et al. 2017).

The process that the government followed to decide on the different themes for discussion is unclear. The claim was that the six themes dealt with “those topics that most preoccupy Colombian society” (Departamento Nacional de Planeación 2019). For some participants, these topics were problematic since they were not agreed in a participatory way and they established a clear position that alienated certain sectors from the start. This lack of a participatory design was noted by many of the participants and named as one of the reasons why many protesting groups refused to take part in the National Conversation, since they feared their participation would ‘legitimise’ a space that was only meant to diffuse tensions and subdue the protests.

For each of the selected themes, the government invited moderators from civil society or academia who were perceived as neutral or non-partisan and whose presence could provide some level of trust for participants. The invitation to dialogue was managed largely by the government (Moderators’ Report 2020) which sparked some scepticism from some participants, particularly during the first meeting which some described as an ‘applause committee’. Since many activists refused to take part, the participants were not particularly ‘representative’ of the broader movement but more so of civil society at large.

### 3.2. Process

The first meeting of the National Dialogue peace section was experienced by several participants as tense. With intense protests going on in the streets, the government was under pressure and many participants had a great deal of pent-up dissatisfaction and grievances that they could now finally express directly to the government. Several times during the meeting, President Duque emphasised the importance of listening, asking participants to listen and be constructive rather than criticising, and stressing that “I am not here to do anything but listen to you”. However, the recording of the meeting and the interviews with participants show that there was very limited listening amongst participants. Contrary to Duque’s declared aim of listening, several interviewees experienced the government’s attitude as defensive with very limited willingness to listen to the concerns of civil society. It is clear from the recording that whenever a comment by a participant was critical towards the government’s current approach, Duque intervened to defend the government. Likewise, representatives from the government, including the President, were given far more speaking time than the remaining participants. Whereas civil society representatives were asked to round up their remarks after two or three minutes, the President once interrupted the order of speakers to “make some reflections” (1:31:27) for 17 minutes. This (re)established a clear power asymmetry between the government and the civil society representatives.

The first meeting was very formal, whereas the remaining four meetings in the peace section were arranged more like group discussions that were then presented in plenary. Here, the format was more interactive, but the power asymmetry and limited dialogue between government and civil society representatives remained. At one point, one of the civil society representatives therefore asked whether it would be possible to engage more directly with government representatives rather than simply presenting their ideas in plenary, but this request was declined.

### 3.3. Outcomes

The protests that National Dialogues are meant to address usually demand some kind of change; this may consist of reforms of specific laws or policies or involve broader societal, political or structural change. For National Dialogues to be meaningful, they need to address the demands for change in the population at large. This does not necessarily mean complying fully with the protesters' demands, but addressing the conditions that give rise to dissatisfaction. Likewise, the inherent purpose of National Dialogues is not only to devise political solutions to particular problems, but also to improve the relations between the participants (Beaujouan et al. 2020).

#### *Relational change*

According to the interviews conducted for this paper, the Colombian National Dialogue did not bring any significant relational change. As stated by a participant: "I don't think anything happened there except for breaking the idea that talking to citizens is not dangerous" (Interview, 15 January 2021). The National Dialogue failed to display key characteristics of dialogue: a sustained, intense dialogue through which process relationships and identities transform (Maddison 2015). Instead, the lack of continuity and accountability of the Colombian National Dialogue decreased participants' trust in the government and failed to transform relationships or increase the understanding of opposing views.

While the relational outcome was limited and even counterproductive when it came to the relationship between the government and the participants, some informants pointed out that the dialogue "was an interesting space in terms of the interaction between the participants" (Interview, 9 February 2021) and that this was "a good step in terms of trust-building, and for not stigmatising others" (Interview, 9 February 2021). However, as argued by Maddison (2015), dialogue needs to be sustained

to have a relational impact, and in this regard the meetings were simply too few.

#### *Policy change*

Besides the limited relational transformation obtained in the Colombian National Dialogue, the sessions also fell short of producing tangible policy changes. A final report with conclusions and proposals from the dialogue was supposed to be presented by 15 March. However, the moderators considered the available time and the structure of the dialogue to be insufficient for them and their teams to be able to extract specific proposals: "the government wanted a quick fix consensus, but this wasn't possible" (Interview, 11 December 2020) and their impression was that the government's commitment was waning. Moreover, the declaration of the Covid emergency drew the government's attention and efforts away from prolonging the dialogue. In the initial stages of the Covid emergency, protesters left the streets, which reduced the pressure on the government, as stated by an interviewee, "Covid suited them greatly"<sup>2</sup> (Interview, 9 February 2021). The session where the government would present the results of the dialogue was first postponed and then cancelled altogether, leaving many participants disappointed.

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2 Translation of 'El Covid les cayó de Perlas'.

### 3.4. Lessons from the Colombian case

While the Colombian case is in many ways an example of an unsuccessful National Dialogue, it nevertheless brings many insights regarding both the dilemmas involved in using National Dialogue as a mechanism for conflict transformation in the context of protests and the related lessons learned on how to (not) design and implement it.

#### ≡ Preparation

First, the case illustrates the importance of allowing sufficient time for designing a National Dialogue. This can be challenging in cases of intense public unrest with protests in the streets and a sense of urgency in terms of solving the issues. Nevertheless, time to properly design the process cannot be underestimated and should be prioritised despite the urgency of the situation. In the case of Colombia, insufficient time was given to properly preparing for the National Dialogue. The design of National Dialogues should, among other things, take into account who to include, which topics to address and in which order and how tables should be arranged to ensure an inclusive, dialogical process. Sufficient time to consider these issues is therefore essential.

#### ≡ Facilitation

Second, while the Colombian National Dialogue was facilitated by different moderators invited by the government, the government still stood as the main organiser of the dialogue and the one who could set the scene, for example, with the President taking up most of the speaking time at the first meeting of the section on peace with legality. This reinforced the asymmetric power relations that National Dialogues, ideally, would counter rather than reinforce. A critical lesson for National Dialogues in a context of protests is therefore to consider the involvement of a governing body with sufficient legitimacy that can facilitate the process and to a large extent ensure an equal dialogue between civil society and government representatives.

#### ≡ Government role

Third, for National Dialogues to be successful, it is crucial that they provide space for people to engage not only with each other but also with the government, as it represents the status quo that most protests are directed towards. While National Dialogue can be a platform for engaged, intense interaction between the government and protesters or society at large, a government can also design National Dialogues so that the main line of interaction is between people. In the Colombian National Dialogue, most of the sessions merely involved dialogue between civil society representatives with limited engagement with the government representatives. It may thus be assumed that the aim of the Grand National Conversation was to defuse tension, buy time and legitimise the government, rather than engage in a genuine dialogue.

#### ≡ Inclusion of activists

Fourth, the Colombian case illustrates the difficulty of arranging National Dialogues in the midst of social unrest and popular protests, not least in terms of how activists can be involved. On the one hand, National Dialogues are excellent tools to engage the broader society on critical issues raised by social movements. On the other hand, bringing in multiple actors besides representatives of the social movements out in the streets risks watering down the dialogue, which is also why many protesters refused to take part. For this reason, and after the Committee started summoning new protests, the government decided to install a parallel 'Table' (Mesa) with the National Strike Committee (Barreto 2019), an action which the President had up to that point refused, stating that he wished for an "inclusive" dialogue (Barreto 2019). This parallel table was meant to discuss the 13 points that the National Strike Committee initially presented to the government as demands (Barreto 2019) but did not reach any conclusions, and importantly, was not integrated into the framework of the National Dialogue.

## 4. Patterns across cases

How symptomatic is the Colombian case across the broader set of cases where National Dialogues were initiated due to large-scale social mobilisation? This section broadens the perspective to look at patterns across cases where National Dialogue formats were applied in contexts of social protests. The focus will only be on cases in which social movement representatives participated directly in the National Dialogue.

### 4.1. A limited success rate

Mapping some of the most recent examples in the table below shows that as in the Colombian case, very few National Dialogues have so far succeeded in bringing about significant relational or policy change in the context of social protests. In fact, the National Dialogue Conference in Yemen seems to be one of the few successful National Dialogues in a context of social unrest and protests. While the conflict later deteriorated into civil war, the National Dialogue was well-designed, it was fairly inclusive in terms of involving youth and women, and it changed the dynamics between participants. As described by a former participant, the Yemeni National Dialogue was “one of the best experiences for the country”. As in Malawi (2011/2012) and Nicaragua (2018), the National Dialogue in Yemen was an outcome of negotiations between the government and leading activists; however, the Yemeni case stands out in relation to the process in the sense that it was initiated after the ousting of a leader (but still with resistance against the elite).

The cases vary in context and process but apart from Yemen, they have achieved limited results in terms of policy or relational change. In cases such as Bahrain (2011), the National Dialogue even fell apart. What can explain this? First, it is important to recognise that the environment for National Dialogue in contexts of social unrest and protests is often very tense, which makes it extremely difficult

to cultivate a spirit of constructive dialogue. Moreover, apart from the National Dialogue in Yemen, which occurred in a transition process, all the other National Dialogues listed in the table below occurred in the phase when a social movement was actively resisting the leadership in a country. As we have seen in the Colombian case, this shaped the attitude of the government, causing it to be very defensive and show limited openness for change, which creates a challenging environment for dialogue. Likewise, in Bahrain, King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa initiated a National Dialogue during the uprising in 2011, with the aim of mediating in the conflict between Sunni and Shia representatives (Andersen 2011). Here, the King positioned himself as facilitator rather than party to the conflict, significantly challenging the potential for change.

Moreover, one of the impediments to generating relational and political change is that National Dialogues are often time-limited. In Hong Kong, the Community Dialogue called for by the Chief Executive, Carrie Lam, in 2019 consisted of only one meeting and in Colombia, five meetings over four months were set aside for the dialogue. In France, around 10,000 meetings were dedicated to the National Dialogue called for by Emmanuel Macron in response to the Yellow Vest movement in 2018 (see also paper on National Dialogues x Climate Change), but they were held over two months. Rather, what is often needed is a longer-term platform for dialogue that can continue even after agreements are made, both to support their implementation and to sustain relational change, which often needs time and continued dialogue (Maddison 2015). Whereas the National Dialogue in France could have aimed for a more ambitious timeline, the very widespread dialogue across the country may serve as inspiration in other contexts, in terms of engaging not only people living in urban areas but a variety of people in all regions of a country.

	Context	Phase	Inclusion	Relational change	Policy change
<b>Bahrain (2011)</b>	Top-down, last-minute participation of opposition, de facto displacement of conflict (from protester-government conflict to religious conflict)	During uprising	Very limited (only five out of 300 seats were allocated to the opposition)	None	None
<b>Malawi (2011/2012)</b>	UN mediation between protesters and government leading to a National Dialogue	During uprising		Limited	None
<b>Yemen (2012/2013)</b>	Post-revolution dialogue supported by the UN. Activists included in governing body that designed the National Dialogue	In post-uprising transition phase	Very inclusive (many activists especially among the youth delegates who made up 20% of the participants)	Some	Some
<b>France (2018)</b>	More than 10,000 meetings were held throughout the country. Organised by local elected officials	During uprising	Limited (overrepresentation of pensioners and mainly participants from the segment already supporting the government)	Limited/None	Limited
<b>Nicaragua (2018)</b>	Organised by the Bishops' Conference one week into the protests. Ended after a few months due to chaotic process and increasing violence in the streets	During uprising	Relatively inclusive with representatives from the social movement, private sector, academics and others	None	None
<b>Hong Kong (2019)</b>	One-day meeting between government and 150 representatives of social movement	During uprising	Selected representatives of the social movement (randomly selected by the government)	None	None
<b>Colombia (2019)</b>	Hasty preparation, limited interaction between civil society and government representatives	During uprising	Relatively inclusive but limited participation of leading activists	Limited	None

Table 1. National Dialogues in the context of social protests

## 4.2. Alternative platforms

In order to address the limitations of official National Dialogues, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have in some cases set up parallel dialogues alongside the official National Dialogues. The aim of these parallel platforms is often to be more inclusive of a broader section of society than the government-initiated National Dialogues. For example, the French President, Emmanuel Macron, initiated a National Dialogue to address the issues raised by the Yellow Vest movement in 2018. However, according to French sociologist Jean-Michel Fourniau, it became more of a ‘monologue’ where participants in the dialogue (whether they participated in the local sessions or contributed via the online platform dedicated to the debate) bore little resemblance to the Yellow Vests and, in reality, were closer to Emmanuel Macron’s electorate (Fourniau 2022). Maybe for this reason, 79% of the French people thought that the National Dialogue would not resolve the political crisis that the country was facing (Fourniau 2022: 275). Therefore, another online platform entitled *Le Vrai Débat*<sup>3</sup> was created. According to Fourniau, this alternative dialogue platform was more effective at addressing the real demands of the movement, included more supporters of the Yellow Vest movement and generated a more deliberative outcome in the discussions (Fourniau 2022).

Likewise, Fundación Ideas para la Paz (FIP) initiated several dialogue projects across Colombia, known as *Tenemos que hablar* (We need to talk), to address the issues raised by the 2020 and 2021 protests that re-emerged after the 2019 National Dialogue. Unlike the government-initiated dialogue, the initiative by FIP was more inclusive and interactive.

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3 The Real Debate, <https://levraidebat.org/>.

## 5. Dilemmas and challenges of National Dialogues in contexts of protests

Initiating National Dialogues in contexts of social unrest comes with a number of challenges and dilemmas, not least due to the highly tense political environment often generated by protests, but also due to the specificities of civil resistance movements, particularly as regards timing, momentum, inclusion of activists, resistance to compromise, and organisational structures.

### ☰ Timing

A critical dilemma when planning a National Dialogue in the context of social protests is when to initiate the dialogue. During peace negotiations between warring parties, it can be difficult to establish an environment conducive to compromise and rapprochement if either or both parties believe they can ‘win’ the war on the battlefield (Zartman and Berman 1982). In nonviolent uprisings, it may likewise be difficult to find an ideal moment for initiating dialogue. Governments which have the upper hand in a crisis situation might be reluctant to soften their position, believing that they are able to overcome the protests by repression. Similarly, during the momentum of the protests and not least when facing police violence, activists will often have limited openness to compromise. However, unlike wars where analysts suggest that parties wait for a ‘mutually hurting stalemate’ where forces cannot move further on the ground, waiting too long to initiate National Dialogues may be counterproductive and involve protests turning violent and/or losing momentum. Although difficult, it is better to initiate National Dialogues sooner than later, while leaving sufficient time for designing the set-up.

Likewise, related to timing, it is strategically critical for both governments and protesters to consider whether to sustain the cycle of protests and repression during the dialogue process. On the one hand, protests can be used during National Dialogues to put continuous pressure on the government and demonstrate ongoing support for the movement. On the other hand, pausing protests can be used as a bargaining chip or precondition for achieving certain goals during dialogue sessions, and the ability to pause protests also indicates unity in the movement. Governments might also consider showing greater tolerance of public gatherings during National Dialogues – for example, by not intervening or repressing protests – to indicate willingness to compromise and cultivate a better climate for dialogue.

### ☰ Momentum

National Dialogues may be controversial in contexts of protests as they risk merely being an instrument for governments to buy time and challenge the momentum of the protests rather than working for genuine change. As stated by Svensson and van de Rijzen, dialogues can end up being a “face-saving option for an illegitimate regime, which can then engage in superficial changes without more deeply transforming society and the state” (2022: 17). Therefore, the key question remains: how can National Dialogues increase rapprochement between a government and a social movement without jeopardising the latter’s momentum?

Moreover, even if a process of National Dialogue leads to outcomes that satisfy social movements to the extent that they decrease or call off their

protest activities, a government might take punitive action against leaders and ordinary members of social movements for their protest activities even after the agreement has been implemented. Even if this does not happen, it is a legitimate fear from protesters, decreasing their openness to reform and compromise and enticing them to stay committed to their maximalist aims such as overthrowing a regime, seen as the only solution. It is therefore critical that National Dialogues find ways to include accountability mechanisms such as security guarantees post-agreement. Likewise, more permanent platforms for dialogue amongst civil society and government representatives might be a way for governments to show more long-term interest in listening to voices from civil society.

### ≡ Maximalist aims and compromise

In relation to mediation between governments and protest movements, Svensson and van de Rijzen suggest mediators make an effort to “make sure that movements are ready to back down, accept compromises and concessions, or at least temporarily avoid further escalation to provide space for dialogue once a mediation process has started” (2022: 17). However, this is easier said than done. Protest movements often mobilise a huge amount of courage and can-do spirit to organise an uprising in the first place, and this spirit often develops into a sense of ‘everything or nothing’ when facing repression in the streets. For this reason, the potential for compromise or de-escalation as a response to concessions from a government is very difficult to materialise in this environment, not least in seemingly leaderless movements with no single unifying figure who can decide and convince fellow activists to be open to compromise.

One of the challenges for protest movements is that activists do not necessarily agree on what they want, apart from perhaps the maximalist goal of toppling a regime, but again with limited or conflicting visions of what should come afterwards if a regime is removed. Ideally, National Dialogues can help to achieve greater clarity amongst protesters and civil society more broadly. This may be extremely

helpful, not only for protesters themselves but also for government figures interested in engaging constructively with activists, as it gives them a broader and clearer set of goals to engage on.

### ≡ Inclusion of activists

One of the most significant challenges when initiating National Dialogues in a context of social protests is how to best include the social movement or activists organising the protests. As we have seen from many of the cases discussed here, protesters are often reluctant to participate in National Dialogues because they may risk losing the momentum of the protest and watering down their goals. The question, therefore, is how can activists be included in National Dialogues? And when protest movements are not directly involved in National Dialogues, which mechanisms can be used to understand their priorities and aspirations and feed them into the dialogue?

One of the design elements that kept protesters from wanting to participate in National Dialogues in Colombia was that activists were given an equal voice along with numerous other civil society organisations and representatives, putting their goals on an equal footing with numerous other aims proposed by civil society. It is therefore worth considering how this can be avoided. Should activists have reserved seats or a special say on the agenda for the National Dialogue?

In the case of Yemen, youth activists from the 2011 movement were included in a governing body responsible for designing the National Dialogue. While activists remained divided on whether to participate or not, it is a good example of how activists can possibly be included at the design stage. There was no formal structure for delegates to consult other youth activists outside the National Dialogue, but they used weekly meetings with their movement to decide which topics to push for. Likewise, activists continued to use methods of nonviolent resistance inside the halls of the National Dialogue, showing up with posters and slogans to push for their specific demands to be discussed and adopted (personal communication

with participant). This shows how activism can feed more directly into National Dialogues, but future National Dialogues may well do more to integrate protesters into the process. This could, for example, be done by consulting activists on how their movement can best be integrated in this particular National Dialogue. While all suggestions from the social movements need not be implemented, taking certain suggestions into account could create more ownership and increase the activists' support for the National Dialogue.

### ≡ Post-dialogue engagement and long-term platforms

One of the difficulties in ensuring that protests lead to lasting change is that the structures of social movements that operate in protest contexts do not always fit the requirements of long-term political engagement. In Egypt, for example, the 2011 protest movement succeeded in overthrowing the Mubarak regime, but after the revolution it had limited political impact compared to movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which was much better organised prior to the transition. In Yemen, activists also missed the opportunity to organise post-National Dialogues and thus continue to influence politics through institutional mechanisms. One of the challenges here is that civil resistance movements often emerge from a genuine distrust of existing political structures and may resist organising themselves in traditional party-political structures or engaging in the traditional political system in other ways. This is unfortunate since most issues cannot be solved within the often limited course of the National Dialogue but need time and consistent efforts to translate into real structural change.

For this reason, rather than necessarily solving all issues in one National Dialogue, the implementation stage of National Dialogues can include establishing more permanent platforms for continued communication between civil society and government representatives, to address the conflict over the long term and continue to work on the often very challenging structural issues that social movements seek to address.

## 6. Conclusion

Organising National Dialogues in contexts of popular uprisings by social movements is both incredibly difficult and potentially important for generating inclusive change. Across all the cases discussed, the difficulties are all too apparent and few successful examples exist. The only successful case examined in this paper is Yemen, where the National Dialogue was initiated after a regime had been toppled by a mass protest movement and although many figures from the 'old' regime remained and took part in the National Dialogue, it was a very different situation than a regime entering dialogue with the people who challenge its leadership. While the Yemeni case can provide inspiration in other situations, it is therefore important to recognise that National Dialogues are particularly difficult in contexts where a protest movement is opposed to the incumbent government.

This paper has sought to map out the lessons from the Colombian case, identify patterns across cases and pinpoint several dilemmas and challenges to be considered when organising a National Dialogue in the context of social protests. The insights from the case studies and dilemmas outlined raise more questions than they answer and are meant to encourage reflection on these critical issues, rather than necessarily providing prescriptive guidance on these difficult matters.

However, the paper does put forward some suggestions on the design, process and implementation of National Dialogues. It underlines the importance of having sufficient time for planning and potentially including activists in the design of the National Dialogue. With regard to the process, it emphasises the criticality of cultivating integrating views from the social movement and encouraging dialogue between the government and civil society representatives, including representatives from the social movement. The potential involvement of a governing body has been flagged as a possible way of increasing the legitimacy of a National Dialogue in contexts of social unrest and handling the inherent power asymmetry between civil society representatives and a government. Finally, regarding implementation, the paper highlights the importance of both political and relational change, including the potential of National Dialogues to enable social movements to establish clarity on their common goals and aspirations. The paper has also suggested considering more permanent platforms for National Dialogues in contexts of social uprisings, not only because relational and policy change often takes time and new issues may arise, but also because this may provide a space for activists to continue fighting for their maximalist aims and thus being more open to compromise.

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