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National Dialogues at crossroads
A series

National Dialogues x Digitalisation

About the author

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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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Abbreviations

CMI   CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation

CSSR   Civil Society Support Room

HD Centre Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue

ICTs   Information and Communication Technologies

LPDF   Libyan Political Dialogue Forum

NLP   Natural Language Processing

NOREF   Norwegian Centre for Conflict Resolution

OSESGY   Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen

PA-X   Peace Agreements Database at the University of Edinburgh

UNDP   United Nations Development Programme

UNHCR   United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

UNSMIL   United Nations Support Mission in Libya

USIP   United States Institute of Peace

1. Introduction

Digitalisation has altered not only the dynamics of political crises, protests, and armed conflicts but also how conflict stakeholders and affected populations make peace. Digital Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) – or simply digital technologies – including ordinary computer software, internet-based applications, and social media, influence how citizens make sense of contemporary conflict and crisis and how they respond to them. Unsurprisingly, the past few years have seen a considerable increase in efforts to leverage digital technologies to support conflict prevention, peacemaking, and peacebuilding. However, **we know relatively little about how digital technologies have been used – or could be used – to support National Dialogues**, which have become an increasingly important vehicle to prevent conflicts and manage complex political change processes. This paper aims to fill this knowledge gap.

As suggested by the definition in the Preface, National Dialogues may not only involve a considerable heterogeneity of possible participants, but also **tend to be conducted in a variety of contexts characterised by different degrees and manifestations of digitalisation**. For example, in the past couple of years, National Dialogues were held in places such as Colombia, Myanmar, and South Sudan – places that differ vastly in digital access, digital literacy, and digital governance. Moreover, in contrast to peace mediation or peacebuilding efforts that are often implemented by a lead organisation in collaboration with partners, National Dialogues are usually carried out through more complex, nationally-led dialogue architectures, which means that social and political context factors will matter even more. Importantly, digitalisation is not simply a technological change process, but one which is socially and politically conditioned. **Digital technologies are not just tools that stand ready to be utilised; they themselves are shaped by and, in turn,**

shape social and political contexts. Particularly when such contexts are in crisis or transition, digitalisation or digital technologies should not be treated as an 'independent variable'. With this in mind, this paper sheds light on the relationship between National Dialogues and digitalisation. It suggests that **digital technologies can be thought of not only as a means for dialogue (procedural dimension), but also as a topic of dialogue (thematic dimension).**

This paper is structured as follows. The first section discusses the importance of not only focusing on the new tools, applications, and methods that digitalisation may offer, but of engaging reflexively with the socio-technical dynamics of contemporary dialogue processes. This means considering how problems and solutions associated with digitalisation translate into potential trade-offs for National Dialogues and the political institutions they aim to amend. The second section discusses the implications of digitalisation for the procedural dimension of National Dialogues – in other words, how dialogues are prepared and implemented. It summarises the most prominent instrumental uses of digital technologies in National Dialogues, such as helping to build trust in the process, enabling direct participation, facilitating consensus, or increasing the transparency of processes. However, the section also encourages a critical engagement with these assumed 'solutions', pointing to possible shortcomings, unintended consequences, and trade-offs that may emerge when digital technologies are employed. Finally, the third section discusses how digitalisation features, or could feature, thematically as an agenda item in National Dialogue efforts.

The paper presents illustrative examples from several National Dialogues and constitutional processes, including in Chad, Egypt, Colombia, Kenya, Lebanon, Myanmar, South Sudan, Tunisia, and Yemen. It also draws on insights

from comparable dialogue efforts that may lack the distinctive criteria of National Dialogues as processes that are nationally owned, formally implemented by national bodies, and focused on the resolution of issues that are of national concern. Examples from other broad-based and inclusive dialogue efforts, for instance, from Libya or Bosnia and Herzegovina, are discussed where they help to provide valuable insights that can be translated to National Dialogue contexts, or to illustrate applications of digital technologies that may be relevant for future National Dialogues. The findings presented in this paper are based on a review of existing literature and public documents on National Dialogues, expert interviews with practitioners, and a focus group discussion with experts and representatives from mediation and dialogue support organisations.

2. A reflexive concern with the procedural and thematic dimensions of digitalisation in National Dialogues

Any call for employing digital technologies to support peacebuilding and peacemaking efforts tends to generate a mixed reaction because digitalisation is commonly associated with both negative and positive effects on peace.[1] The existing academic, policy, and practice contributions all stress that technologies can be employed in malevolent ways that exacerbate conflicts and grievances, as well as in benevolent ways that help prevent, mitigate, or transform conflict and build lasting peace. Moreover, these good uses are commonly associated with risks of possible negative consequences. This Janus-faced character of technologies cannot be overcome, because it is the result of their dual-use potential – inherent in most material objects – and also characterises non-digital technologies and tools (think, for instance, of a hammer that can be employed to both build and destroy things). While we should assume that National Dialogue convening bodies and support actors will aim to employ digital technologies to improve the process, this may nonetheless result in trade-offs because digital approaches come with certain costs or risks.

When making sense of the effects of digitalisation on National Dialogues, it is thus important to move beyond a tool-centred perspective. The effects that digital technologies have on peace processes are not just the result of a specific tool, but derive from the distributed agency of socio-technical systems composed of machines *and* the humans that design and employ them. It matters not only how digital technologies are *used* but how we comport ourselves vis-à-vis them. We can critically and reflexively engage with the role of technology in efforts to prevent conflict, overcome crises, and build peace, by asking how claims and assumptions of digitalisation and digital technologies shape what is employed and how, and by considering the social and political consequences that result from their use. Which specific solutions are certain digital applications said to provide, and for which problems? Which peacebuilding agendas and objectives may certain technologies support, and which not? Which blind spots and negative consequences could emerge? And what could be done – and is already being done – to strengthen efforts to ensure that digitalisation is leveraged in support of peaceful coexistence?

Digital technologies are increasingly used instrumentally to enhance National Dialogue processes. At the same time, National Dialogues also provide the opportunity to reflect on and shape the dynamics of digitalisation. That said, this paper encourages a reflexive engagement with digitalisation and the tools, applications, and methods it offers in both *procedural* and *thematic* dimensions. On a procedural level, National Dialogue conveners and support actors may want to consider which solutions they associate with employing a particular digital technology, application, or method and what the consequences of implementing such assumptions might be – in terms of trade-offs or negative consequences. On

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1 This section builds on the argument presented by Hirblinger et al. (2022), which provides a more detailed discussion of the Janus-faced representation of the impact of digital technologies on peace, and presents a critical-reflexive framework for digital peacebuilding.

a thematic level, National Dialogue participants may want to reflect on the problems associated with digitalisation in the specific context of the dialogue effort and how dialogues could provide an opportunity to alter the socio-political context that conditions the dynamics of digitalisation, such as through building political awareness, shaping commitments to norms and values, or establishing constitutional or legal safeguards that may help reduce the hurdles that digitalisation may present on the pathway towards peaceful coexistence.

A particular challenge for using digital technologies in the context of National Dialogues stems from the fact that the convening bodies may have limited time and/or technical capacity to plan and assess the intended uses of digital technologies. In thematic terms, digitalisation may not be very high on their agenda either. Besides, the different parties involved in the dialogue effort may not necessarily agree on joint priorities. Moreover, third parties who support the process commonly play an advisory role, but their suggestions will not be binding or enforceable. This suggests that ideally, all parties and stakeholders should have to deliberate jointly on the assumed positive and negative effects of technology use to decide what should be used, how, and for what purpose. In practice, however, this is often not feasible. Yet, because National Dialogues form an important part of political change processes, they provide an opportunity for developing, practising and setting the norms and standards for the future political order. Procedures may be implemented to enable a dialogue on substance, but they also reflect thematic commitments – for example, to broad-based, transparent, and legitimate political processes and governance arrangements. That said, how dialogue conveners and participants employ digital technologies instrumentally and in procedural terms may also be illustrative of how they think of them in terms of thematic substance.

Therefore, convening bodies and users of digital technology will require the necessary knowledge to make informed decisions about the possible positive and negative effects and the resulting trade-offs of employing certain digital technologies in the dialogue process – as well as in the many other

political processes that will follow. A potentially large number of trade-offs can be identified for any given case, and all depend on the specific dialogue context, as well as the positionality of those engaged in the assessment. Some of the most relevant trade-offs are summarised below (for further reading, see Hirblinger 2020; Dajer 2018; Kotsiras 2020; Hirblinger 2022; Schirch 2022):

- Digital technologies are widely employed to enhance inclusion and participation in peace processes. However, in many dialogue contexts, conflict stakeholders and the general population have limited digital access and literacy, which may lead to the exclusion or marginalisation of specific groups.

- Digital technologies can support efforts to empower specific stakeholder and population groups by enhancing their voice and agency in the political debate. However, using digital infrastructures in conflict-affected contexts may further aggravate societal or political hierarchies and cleavages, such as between an educated urban class and rural populations, between different demographics, or between population groups that enjoy different degrees of privilege and wealth.

- Digital technologies often help to maintain dialogue efforts when in-person meetings are impossible due to insecurity and armed violence. However, taking dialogue processes online often comes with new risks. National Dialogues are conducted in contexts where the digital rights of the population are insufficiently protected, digital literacy is low, and incumbent regimes or third actors may use online surveillance or cyber-attacks to retain an upper hand in the political arena.

- Digital technologies are often employed to generate better information, data, and evidence about a specific process and make dialogue processes more structured and detail-oriented. However, such 'sincere' uses of technology may result in deadlocks – particularly in situations where more ambiguity is necessary, and they can be politically exploited to steer dialogues in certain directions through seemingly 'scientific' methods.

3. Digitalisation in procedural terms: How digital technologies shape National Dialogues

Those who aim to leverage digitalisation and digital technologies to support dialogue processes will necessarily follow a solution-centred approach by designing and employing digital applications instrumentally. Therefore, this section discusses the most prominent instrumental applications of digital technologies in support of National Dialogues, drawing on examples, insights, and lessons learned from past National Dialogues and from similar broad-based dialogue processes. However, National Dialogues are vast and complex processes that entail a large number of activities. The list presented below does not claim to be comprehensive, and any of the instrumental uses could possibly be further differentiated, depending on the view of the reader and the context in which they are applied. Therefore, it is best to understand the list as a flexible heuristic with learning examples that may help dialogue conveners and support actors to reflect on how certain digital applications may provide certain solutions – and which new challenges and problems may emerge alongside them. It is not a check-list for how digital technologies should be used, but meant to encourage a reflexive engagement with them.

Importantly, the requirements for technical support differ across the three main phases of National Dialogues, i.e. the preparation phase which entails building political will and momentum as well as analytical and logistical groundwork, the process phase which tends to encompass the main proceedings, broad-based consultations, dialogue activities, and often a concluding conference, and the implementation phase, which often requires the documentation of results, further work in technical commissions, political reforms, and institutional changes (see Berghof Foundation 2017, 23). Some of the instrumental uses discussed below can benefit National Dialogue across all phases, but many are most suitable in one or two phases. Moreover, some of the digital applications discussed can easily be implemented independently by the convening bodies. For instance, secretariats, working groups and committees will usually be well placed to use standard internet-based applications and software to coordinate processes and communicate results. However, more specialised applications may require the involvement of support actors with the relevant expertise and technical capacity. Such decisions are dependent on the context of the dialogue, the technical capacities of the convening bodies, and the digital infrastructures that are available. Finally, it is worthwhile to ask if the digital applications will engage the dialogue delegates – i.e. the participants in the formal proceedings, working groups or committees, or if they engage the general population. An overview of these characteristics can be found in the table below.

Instrumental Use	Phase			Used by …		Engages with …	
14	Preparation	Process	Implement-ation	Convening bodies	Support actors	Delegates	General population
Preparing and coordinating processes	X	X	X	X	X		
Building trust and political support	X	X		X	X	X	X
Surveying stakeholder needs and interests	X				X		X
Enabling remote consultations	X	X		X	X		X
Enabling remote direct participation		X		X	X		X
Facilitating consensus		X		X	X	X	
Enhancing advocacy	X	X			X	X	X
Increasing the transparency of processes		X	X	X	X	X	X
Countering hate speech and misinformation	X	X	X		X		X

Table 1. Overview of Instrumental Uses of Digital Applications in National Dialogues

3.1. Preparing and coordinating processes

To start with, web- and social media-based platforms often play a ubiquitous but essential role in the preparation, coordination/organisation, and implementation of National Dialogues. Even in contexts where most or all actual dialogue activities occur 'in person' or 'offline', emails, messaging applications, online meeting, conferencing, cloud storage and collaborating platforms, and much other standard software such as text editing, graphic design, visualisation, and online calendars

are now widely employed throughout the processes. These various applications create a digital support infrastructure that is often indispensable for information exchange and communication between convening bodies such as presidiums, secretariats, or working groups, but particularly also for support actors who tend to provide their services remotely. Digitally enabled support measures can help establish National Dialogue infrastructures early in the process. Applications that enable the sharing of knowledge and lessons learned can help dialogue conveners to establish relevant mechanisms early on, in the preparation phase (see Box 1).

Box 1: Hybrid capacity development in the preparation of the Ethiopian National Dialogue

The Berghof Foundation has produced a capacity development resource for National Dialogues that combines an online course for self-paced, asynchronous learning with facilitated synchronous reflection sessions to deliberate on the content of the online modules. The digital course contains written information, audio-visual material, and interactive exercises and can be provided via a flash drive in contexts with low internet connectivity. The facilitated learning sessions have at times been held via online conference platforms, but in-person meetings have proven more suitable in contexts with limited digital literacy. In addition, experts based outside of the country setting have been invited to provide inputs and answer questions.

This hybrid approach was used in support of the Ethiopian National Dialogue in 2021-2022, where national facilitators accompanied the learning process based on translated training manuals. The experience of establishing this resource demonstrates the benefits of choosing a 'hybrid' approach, which allows for a flexible 'mix and match' of digital, remote, and in-person elements according to the context's requirements.

Moreover, in the preparation and process phase, online coordination mechanisms established through messaging groups can provide a support system that helps dialogue efforts to get and stay 'on track'. Regular updates, newsletters, and informal exchanges also enable routine and repetitive interactions between stakeholders and support actors who may help to shepherd or nudge processes forward (Hirblinger 2022). Compared to in-person meetings or traditional means of communication such as phone calls, these online platforms enable instant and decentred communication, facilitating crowd responses to political developments and emerging challenges.

Notably, social media or messaging groups are often employed even in 'low-tech' contexts or in processes where dialogues officially do not have an online dimension. For instance, international support actors and national civil society connected via messaging services to exchange information during the ongoing National Dialogue in Chad (2022-2023). While digital applications commonly increase the efficiency, flexibility, and speed of coordination mechanisms, the reliance on digital infrastructures also creates new vulnerabilities, including through internet surveillance, censorship, or fragile or blocked infrastructures that may impact coordination efforts at critical moments. In Chad, limited connectivity and frequent power cuts

created challenges for remote coordination, even among urban actors. In places like Yemen and South Sudan, where digital connectivity outside the capital and larger cities is often precarious, traditional means of communication are necessary to get all the key actors involved. This creates the risk that National Dialogues are coordinated and carried out at different speeds and intensity, with those parts of the infrastructure that are less well or not digitally connected lagging behind. A further challenge for the ubiquitous uses of digital technologies is that coordination infrastructures will be less centralised, making it difficult to determine if all relevant actors are included in a coordination effort. Moreover, the mere establishment of digital infrastructures for the preparation and coordination of National Dialogues does not in and of itself establish a political process. Therefore, conveners and support actors should ensure that they do not create a purely 'virtual' digital infrastructure, but one that helps to establish an actual political process.

3.2. Building trust and political support

National Dialogue processes can make an effective contribution to a more peaceful political order when they constructively engage all segments of society. Particularly in the early phases of dialogue efforts, online communication provides a convenient, flexible, and affordable means to establish rapport with the broad range of stakeholders to be involved in the dialogue effort and build trust between them and the process. At the most fundamental level, this means informing the public about the National Dialogue. Besides public statements and press releases now commonly shared online and on social media, National Dialogue convening bodies often create websites or social media groups to inform the public about the planned process. Often, such activities will lead to opportunities for direct participation (see below). For example, the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission communicates via Twitter and Facebook, where it shared information about the selection process for the bottom-up national consultation.[2] In South Sudan, UNDP supported the establishment of a website and social media presence to provide information about the proceedings and invite participation (UNDP 2017, 14). Moreover, to encourage participation in an online dialogue process in Bolivia, the Vice Presidency of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, with the support of the United Nations, created a dedicated website which provided basic information about the process and the objectives of the dialogue.[3] The dialogue was also advertised on social media, where participants' personal stories were published to share insights and build trust in the process.[4]

In addition, support actors may launch awareness campaigns, for instance, involving regular social media posts and targeted advertising, to promote the dialogue and inform the public about its objectives and options for participation. Such

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2   See https://www.facebook.com/EthioNDC
3   See https://boliviaconversa.bo/reencuentro-nacional/
4   See, for instance, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Uo8DACcnHw

measures are also essential to ensure continued support. For instance, in support of the ongoing high-level political dialogue process and to prepare for the National Conference in Libya in 2018, the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD Centre) created a dedicated website on the country-wide consultative process and shared details about the different ways in which citizens could engage with it. It also published news about future consultations and posted reports and images from earlier meetings. In addition, social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter were employed to inform the public about the consultations and encourage participation (Hirblinger 2020, 24). However, merely sharing information does not necessarily lead to impact. Public communication is not a quick fix for a lack of trust, particularly if other parameters in the process may be in question, such as the representativeness of convening bodies and committees, or the security of delegates.

Moreover, messaging and video conferencing applications provide a means of connecting stakeholders and establishing proximity between them. Much of this will unfold in an unorganised and organic manner, and the extent to which online communication is used to this end depends largely on the degree to which it is used for similar purposes already. For instance, third parties may use text messaging and calling apps to build relations with representatives of the convening bodies or delegates. Support actors can also encourage rapprochement between different stakeholders in a targeted way, e.g. by facilitating meetings and exchanges, particularly in preparation for the formal proceedings of a National Dialogue, which are usually still in-person events. However, establishing trusted relationships exclusively online may be challenging. A widely adopted approach is to sequence in-person and online meetings depending on process needs, dynamics, and available resources. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, dialogue efforts in support of the intra-Libyan talks, i.e. the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), had to be mainly moved online. Before the virtual meetings, the HD Centre organised an in-person consultative meeting with key stakeholders in Montreux, Switzerland, in September 2020 (UNSMIL 2020). Moreover, after two virtual sessions of the LPDF in November, the forum convened in Tunis for in-person meetings that resulted in concrete outcomes, such as a roadmap for national elections (UNSMIL 2021). Similar process designs that help build political momentum can be envisioned for the preparation phase of National Dialogues.

3.3. Surveying stakeholder needs and interests

Digital technologies also provide a whole new array of options to map out stakeholder interests and positions, as well as the narratives that underpin them – a task commonly carried out by support actors to directly inform the dialogue process or other accompanying activities. Digital methods can enhance such efforts because they enable a more structured and nuanced assessment of stakeholder interests and needs, the collection of detailed demographic information, and the computation and visualisation of results. Conventional population surveys tend to be administered in a hybrid fashion, i.e. human data collectors would use mobile data input devices and data collection and analysis software to collect the data. However, surveys are increasingly run via online platforms, as well as via conventional messaging apps that enable even easier access (see Textbox 2 next page).

Box 2: Strengthening Women's Participation in Yemen

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Build Up assisted the Office of the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General for Yemen (OSESGY) to maintain an inclusive peace process as far as possible and to gauge opinions, perspectives, and insights on peace and conflict in Yemen. A particular goal was to strengthen the participation of women and to understand how protracted insecurity affects women's daily lives. In late 2020, Build Up administered a survey via WhatsApp to identify topics that women would want to discuss further. Insights from the survey were compared to the results of a social media analysis that explored conversations on social media. Moreover, in February 2021, the team conducted a mapping to identify a diverse network of women who would want to participate in further consultations. Finally, in March 2021, the team held 10 focus group discussions via WhatsApp, engaging a total of 93 women. To ensure the safety of all participants, the team shared a code of conduct, asked everyone for their consent to use the obtained information, and provided a back channel through which the participants could reach out if they felt unsafe. Before the focus group discussions, the team reached out individually to the participants to establish trusted relationships and nurture a conducive atmosphere for dialogue.

A new set of methods also promises to help map stakeholder positions from publicly available information on social media, using automated data- and text-mining tools that allow the extraction of information from text. Social media data such as tweets can be systematically analysed to generate insights into certain population groups or stakeholders' narratives, beliefs, or positions (Hirblinger, Morrison and Larrauri 2020). Such 'soft data' can provide insights into the attitudes of conflict parties and stakeholders that may inform their behaviour in the National Dialogue process. However, social media analysis cannot replace conventional consultation methods, because it does not establish a representative picture of the views or needs of the population. Narratives or stances posted online are not necessarily congruent with what would be stated in a dialogue context, and social media content provides a difficult source for a representative sample. However, in contexts where opinions and narratives are increasingly shaped through online interaction, analysing social media data may provide valuable additional insights.

Importantly, 'off the shelf' text-mining tools such as sentiment analysis or topic modelling tools often do not provide meaningful analytical categories for dialogue efforts. Therefore, organisations such as Build Up aim to offer tailor-made applications that promise to produce results that are better suited to provide relevant insights. For instance, to validate and expand upon the topics identified via the survey mentioned in the previous paragraph, Build Up mapped opinions on social media. In 2021, they also launched the dedicated open-source social media mapping tool Phoenix, which integrates standard topic modelling, sentiment and network analysis approaches and also promises needs-based machine learning to develop customised classification models that can potentially help with more tailored analysis tasks.[5] However, an important concern should be with how the results of such analysis are ultimately used to inform political processes. Analysts may be able to draw some conclusions from such data, e.g. on which demands are most frequently expressed by social media users, or which societal fault lines are most present online. However, such data will not automatically count in the dialogue, but must be carefully transferred, for instance through expert or working group meetings.

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5   https://howtobuildup.org/programs/digital-conflict/phoenix/

3.4. Enabling remote consultations

In Libya in 2012, Mustafa A. G. Abushagur, the Prime Minister-elect, used Facebook to poll citizens on whether they preferred the constitution-making body to be appointed by the parliament or directly elected by the people (Grant 2012). This is an example of how social media can be used informally by political leaders or representatives of convening bodies to solicit direct input from the population in the planning phase of a dialogue process. However, it must be noted that the ad hoc solicitation of inputs on social media may come with considerable challenges, particularly regarding the representativeness of such results. Therefore, many dialogue conveners also offer the opportunity to submit written reform proposals as part of organised and systematic consultations. For instance, dialogue committees or constitutional reform commissions often solicit inputs from the general public via online forms, email, or social media (Gluck and Ballou 2014, 3). In Ghana, the Constitutional Review Committee received over 60,000 public submissions to amend the 1992 constitution, sourced inter alia via email, Facebook, and Twitter (GhanaWeb 2010). From these submissions, 25 issues were selected for further scrutiny, and a mobile phone project was launched that asked citizens to express their views on these issues via SMS (Joy News 2010).

A particular challenge in such contexts can be the systematic and transparent analysis of the large amounts of data that may be received. In Colombia in 2012, Point 6 in the framework agreement between the government and FARC stated that "[A] mechanism will be established to receive, by physical or electronic means, proposals from citizens and organizations on the points of the agenda" (International Crisis Group 2012, 36). A website was created for citizens to make suggestions to the parties on any topic, which received over 3000 proposals in the first few hours alone, putting substantial strain on the government's and FARC's time and resources to analyse these proposals (UNDPPA and HD Centre 2019, 26). The government partially outsourced the analysis of citizens' submissions to Fundación Ideas para la Paz,[6] a Colombian NGO, which presented statistical and qualitative analyses of the proposals to the parties.

Notably, remote consultations can also be hampered by concerns about online surveillance or the misuse of data by governments. For instance, the Tunisian presidency launched an online consultation in preparation for a National Dialogue in 2022, but only about 3% of eligible voters participated in the exercise. Moreover, many citizens expressed "fear that their privacy won't be respected over the gathering of data, despite assurances given by authorities" (ANSA English Corporate Service 2022). This demonstrates well that consultative mechanisms will not in and of themselves address the more deep-seated concerns that may have caused the need for dialogue in the first place.

3.5. Enabling remote direct participation

National Dialogues commonly come with various opportunities for direct participation, including attending the main plenary proceedings, the meetings of working groups, or broad-based consultative meetings, all of which are conventionally conducted in person. The assumption is that the views, opinions, and positions shared during these meetings should directly inform the outcomes of the dialogue. These efforts are usually conducted in a planned and systematic manner, with an eye on guaranteeing inclusivity and representativeness as much as possible.

While 'offline' meetings are still the norm, an increasing number of National Dialogues also provide opportunities for direct remote participation in the main proceedings and working group or committee meetings, thus creating a 'hybrid' process. Remote communication and virtual meetings, including with stakeholders and

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6   https://www.peaceinsight.org/es/organisations/fip/?location=colombia&theme

constituencies outside the country, such as political exiles and diaspora groups, allow for an initiation or continuation of processes despite ongoing armed violence, insurgency, or political repression that would pose a risk to in-person activities or make the participation of certain groups impossible. For instance, for South Sudan's National Dialogue process in 2017, in-person consultations were held in all 10 state capitals. However, the dialogue was held while nearly 2.2 million South Sudanese refugees were hosted in neighbouring countries and internal displacement was widespread. Therefore, UNHCR assisted a dozen refugees in the DRC, Ethiopia, Kenya, Sudan, and Uganda to connect virtually to the dialogue and enabled 26 internally displaced persons (IDPs) and returnees across South Sudan to attend the proceedings of the South Sudanese National Dialogue online (Xinhua 2020).

While these numbers are relatively low, they demonstrate at least the feasibility of creating opportunities for the remote participation of refugee populations.

This means that digital platforms can enable a continuation of National Dialogues when the conditions in the country do not allow for in-person meetings. A further striking example is the continuation of dialogue efforts in Myanmar after the coup d'état in 2021 (see Box 3 below). However, the continued political crises and violence in South Sudan and Myanmar also demonstrate the possible limitations of taking dialogues online. If it fails to initiate or support political change, remote participation turns into a mere symptom of persistent challenges such as political persecution and insecurity, rather than being a remedy for them.

Box 3: Direct Participation in Myanmar's National Dialogue Efforts

In Myanmar, online conferencing was used to conduct meetings on the sidelines of the official government-sponsored National Union Conference in 2019 and 2020. Supplementing in-person meetings, these online exchanges between conflict stakeholders were particularly useful for breaking deadlocks over specific technical and policy issues. After the military coup d'état in 2021, the formal process was discontinued, and in-person meetings were no longer feasible due to the high levels of armed violence and political repression across the country. However, political opposition groups organised a continuation of the dialogue online, which was also joined by many of the armed groups that had been absent from the Union Conference. The online process involved up to 380 participants, who negotiated a Federal Democracy Charter, with nine thematic committees developing parts of the document. Following the completion of the Charter, the committees continued to meet to develop more detailed policies in areas such as security, humanitarian response, housing, education, and transitional justice. This arrangement also allowed for the flexible integration of thematic experts located in other parts of the world who could share their experience, insights, and lessons learned from comparable contexts. At the time of writing, the online forum is used to develop a transitional constitution to support a future return to democratic governance after the end of military rule.

3.6. Facilitating consensus

The mere solicitation of input from conflict parties, stakeholders, and the general population does not automatically mean that consensus-based outcomes can be produced. In fact, there is a risk that the opposite is the case. Many past National Dialogues have been criticised for a lack of joint decision-making and, consequently, for outcome documents that are only partially representative and lack public support. Digital facilitation methods are increasingly viewed as a solution to this problem. Data on the stakeholders' interests and positions can be further employed to facilitate joint decision-making and consensus-building among dialogue participants. These methods may not be employed in the formal proceedings, but they are commonly used by support actors in Track 2 peacemaking efforts and could also be employed during preparatory or side events to National Dialogues. One straightforward method, employed for instance in the Myanmar context, is the Single Text Negotiation method. Developed originally before text could be instantly shared through large computer screens, projectors or cloud-based text processing software (Susskind, McKearnan and Thomas-Larmer 1999), the method now enables participants to collaborate on a draft text. This approach enables a focused, detailed, and output-oriented dialogue process.

However, it goes without saying that participants in dialogue processes do not tend to agree easily. Therefore, support actors can facilitate consensus-building with participatory digital methods that help build common ground among the participants, for instance, by identifying common themes, interests, or priorities. For example, workshop participants can first get involved in data collection and joint analysis and interpretation of data online or during in-person meetings, and then also engage in a facilitated discussion of which issues should be addressed in the National Dialogue and how. In support of the Yemen National Dialogue, for instance, the CMI – Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation (CMI) ran several workshops with civil society representatives to identify the most important issues and peace process priorities. To this end, CMI commonly used a combination of online surveys and web-based rating and ranking methodologies to identify issues that needed to be addressed in the peace process and compare them across constituencies. Various data visualisation methods were then used to highlight commonalities between the positions and to identify shared priorities (Hirblinger, Brummer and Kufus 2023). Importantly, these methods allow representatives of stakeholders or conflict parties to jointly review and discuss the results, which integrates the participants' feedback into the analysis in an iterative manner. The participatory approach often stimulates further joint action (see the sub-section on advocacy below). Such digital methods seem particularly relevant to facilitate progress in thematic working groups.

Furthermore, support actors are increasingly attempting to scale such joint data collection and analysis efforts in ways which would help generate statistically reliable results. For instance, in Yemen, the UN Special Envoy, with the support of the UN Innovation Cell, deployed the Remesh AI platform as a dialogue tool for the ongoing peace process. The platform enables synchronous communication between a facilitator and up to 1000 participants. The dialogue consisted of three hours of live, interactive online discussion during which over 500 participants expressed their thoughts on the prospect of a nationwide ceasefire, the future of the political peace process, and what is needed to alleviate humanitarian suffering (OSESGY 2020). The Remesh platform provides various methods for recording participants' stances, including through natural language input as well as ranking and polling exercises. This makes it possible to identify the most representative verbatim answers, quantify their representativeness and cluster them into population groups (Masood Alavi et al. 2022; Bilich et al. 2019). While not per se creating consensus between the participants, such mass online consultation methods help to identify the most representative stances among the population and allow a degree of moderated interaction between a large group of participants, thus preparing the ground for further negotiations in the course of the National Dialogue. Such online efforts could help build nationwide consensus on core issues in ways which supplement traditional consultative mechanisms.

In established democracies, digital platforms are increasingly used to establish policy consensus that yields concrete results. For instance, a digital tool called Pol.is has been used for open consultations on policy proposals. In Taiwan, the tool powered the online platform vTaiwan, which invites public consultations across several stages that combine a range of methods. The process starts with the submission of policy proposals, which are then evaluated through surveys and ranking exercises to identify different opinion groups. This is followed by facilitated live online consultations that provide a space for reflection, an exchange of ideas, and the establishment of a consensus. Finally, the exercise results can be used to craft legislation or formulate guidelines. The platform has been employed to tackle more than 30 policy issues in Taiwan in a participatory manner (Hsiao et al. 2018; Tang 2019). Since then, the method has been used in numerous other cases.[7] A similar system could be used to generate consensus-based outcomes in the context of National Dialogues, although it should be noted that such an approach would more or less replace conventional process designs and that most of these processes – while broad-based and inclusive – still only involve a select number of often highly educated stakeholders. Moreover, part of the consensus-building process is facilitated through statistical methods. However, consensus-building at a national level should also entail deliberation between a representative group of dialogue participants. This not only helps identify the most widely accepted position, but also convinces the participants of its merits and thus helps to produce results that are more likely to be viewed as legitimate. This process requires not only computational but also cognitive and emotional work on the part of the participants. Therefore, conveners should carefully check if the identified consensus has in fact also translated into a change of positions among the participants – and whether it is accepted.

3.7. Enhancing advocacy

Dialogue outcomes also tend to be shaped by the advocacy work of certain interest groups and peace support actors that aim to insert themselves in the public parts of the dialogue and promote certain topics, viewpoints, or demands. Recently, this has included issues of democratic governance, human rights, and particularly the rights of women and minority groups. Here, digital technologies and particularly social media have provided an effective means to raise awareness about these topics through public advocacy, including through campaigns and targeted advertising. Such public-facing efforts tend to be accompanied by exchanges, workshops, and closed-door meetings involving members of civil society organisations or political parties that share similar interests and agendas, and many such meetings may, of course, also be held online.

Moreover, digital technologies enable new and creative forms of advocacy, such as staging public events and processes aimed at influencing the formal National Dialogue. For instance, in Egypt, the drafting of the 2013 constitution was accompanied by the preparation of a 'parallel constitution' online,[8] where an open-source constitutional text was accessible to and editable by the general public. The drafting process was organised by an Egyptian civil society organisation and was supported by a dedicated social media group and a series of online and in-person events streamed on social media to promote the process and its outcomes. This parallel process was meant to demonstrate discrepancies between public demands and proposals for the new political order and the results of the drafting process of the so-called Egyptian Committee of Fifty, which was perceived as closed-door, exclusive, and intransparent (Gluck and Ballou 2014, 4). However, as with other online practices, a key concern must be the impact of such efforts on the actual political process, particularly when the delivery of the advocacy message to decision-makers and dialogue participants cannot be ensured.

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7   https://compdemocracy.org/Case-studies/

8   https://www.facebook.com/events/528922027185995

Moreover, third parties and support actors may provide additional opportunities for direct participation in advance of, or parallel to, official consultations and proceedings. Such efforts may shed light on thematic aspects and provide additional perspectives or knowledge resources to participants involved in drafting outcome documents. While often labelled as 'capacity-building', such efforts usually come with implicit normative agendas and should thus be understood as an advocacy tool. For instance, as early as 2005, the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the International Network to Promote the Rule of Law established an online discussion forum to solicit insights from experts involved in Iraq's constitutional reform process; these insights were then conveyed to Iraqi counterparts and the UN Assistance Mission in Iraq (Gluck and Ballou 2014, 23). These efforts focus on change at the expert level of dialogues, which can result in legitimacy deficits if decisions are based purely on the transferred knowledge. This means that additional efforts should be spent on making relevant knowledge resources available to a wider group of interested stakeholders and the general population.

3.8. Increasing the transparency of processes

A fundamental prerequisite of inclusive National Dialogues processes is transparency – however, very often, the opposite is the case. Transparency can be enhanced through the publishing, documenting, and archiving of information about the process and its outcomes. In most cases, internet and social media users may be expected to enhance transparency by publishing information about the process in organic and decentred ways. Dialogue participants and observers commonly share details about the process online, including through the leaking of draft documents and other relevant material. For instance, during the drafting of the 2013 Egyptian constitution, activists published leaked copies of the draft constitution on Twitter to prompt a more inclusive discussion (Gluck and Ballou 2014, 4). Likewise, formal convening bodies and third parties can also contribute to transparency by sharing content on dedicated social media channels. These measures may create trust in the process (see above), but they may also reduce it, if the shared information reveals shortcomings and problems with the process. However, social media platforms are usually unsuitable as a permanent archive, due to the algorithmically mediated sharing of content, the often limited search capacities, difficulties retrieving large amounts of content, and privacy concerns for end users.

A better option for documenting National Dialogue processes and outcomes are content repositories on simple websites hosted by the formal convening bodies or support actors. For example, the Yemen National Dialogue was supported through a regularly updated website about the process and its outcomes (Gaston 2014, 342).

To support dialogue efforts in Syria, the Civil Society Support Room (CSSR) website documents all regional outreach and virtual consultation meetings, such as the virtual regional consultations with Syrian civil society from 21 to 29 June 2021.[9] The

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9   https://cssrweb.org/en/round/virtual-regional-consultations/

website is accessible in both English and Arabic. The CSSR is jointly implemented by swisspeace and NOREF under the strategic guidance of the Office of the UN Special Envoy. Moreover, in support of the LPDF in Libya, UNSMIL hosted the forum's official website,[10] where press statements and documentation of dialogue activities were published (UNSMIL 2021). Alternatively, openly accessible internet databases such as the Peace Agreements Database (PA-X) at the University of Edinburgh contain some agreements concluded to establish National Dialogue institutions or document dialogue outcomes. Besides archiving the agreement text, PA-X provides a coded summary of the content, as well as timelines of the implementation process and, in some cases, a quantitative measurement of progress.

3.9. Countering hate speech and misinformation

Like most, if not all, other political processes, National Dialogues today are also influenced by the increasing prevalence of hate speech and disinformation online and on social media. Hate speech tends to inhibit dialogue efforts across all phases of the process because it reproduces harmful stereotypes about population groups with certain identity markers, creates a foundation for further violence, and reproduces narratives and beliefs that justify inequality, injustice, and discrimination. Disinformation may harm National Dialogues through the intentional and often targeted spreading of falsehoods regarding the nature of the effort, its objectives, or its relevance. It may also be aimed at discrediting prominent individuals or organisations involved in or supporting the dialogue. For example, social media has become a central arena for Chad's volatile political transition. According to the International Crisis Group (2022, 11), the use of social media by government, opposition leaders, and citizens has fuelled ethnic tensions and civil unrest during Chad's transition period. Harmful social media content spreads organically, i.e. through individual users who create and/or share it via their personal accounts. However, it may also be spread through organised campaigns, including 'troll farms' that fabricate content in support or on behalf of conflict parties or stakeholders that wish to disrupt and sabotage the process.

Efforts to mitigate the adverse effects of hate speech and disinformation are not commonly carried out by formally established dialogue bodies. However, there are examples of social media platforms responding to organised disinformation campaigns after analysts alerted them. For example, Facebook removed a Russia-affiliated network of 26 pages, 16 groups, 211 profiles, and 17 Instagram accounts that aggressively attempted to disrupt the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum in November 2020 with distinct content that stood out from organic

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10   https://unsmil.unmissions.org/libyan-political-dialogue-forum?page=3

activity (SIO 2020). Experts at the Stanford Internet Observatory identified the orchestrated campaign, and Facebook acted the same day their report was published. However, peace support actors who provide ad hoc and process-oriented assistance to the effort will often not be well positioned to contribute to a meaningful response because a systematic, comprehensive, and effective monitoring of online and social media content tends to require technical skills and capacities that must be carefully developed over a longer time.

Efforts to prevent hate speech and disinformation are increasingly common in the context of democratic elections (see, for instance, Global Voices 2020), and could also be expanded to support National Dialogue efforts. Where dedicated organisations and projects already exist, they can help mitigate the adverse effects of hate speech and misinformation in several ways. This entails the monitoring of online and social media accounts, usually involving a team of human observers who will employ specialised software to retrieve, review and analyse content, including software that relies on Natural Language Processing (NLP) models. While many National Dialogues are conducted in places where major international languages such as English, French, or Arabic are widely spoken, a particular challenge emerges for the monitoring of languages for which no NLP models exist, which means that ample human capacity is necessary for comprehensive monitoring. The response to hate speech and disinformation involves a range of actors, including the content management units of social media platforms that will decide about the flagging or removal of harmful content, as well as partners who can support efforts to publish content that counters and debunks harmful messages, which is particularly important in cases where harmful content is spread through organised campaigns.

Of course, such efforts tend not to address the underlying causes of hate speech, such as organised instigation due to political calculus, or a history of racism and discrimination. This means that efforts to fight hate speech only treat symptoms, aiming to establish a more conducive environment that enables more profound political change. It must also be noted that there is a risk that authoritarian regimes will use the fight against hate speech and disinformation as a pretext to silence political opponents. Therefore, National Dialogue conveners may want to formulate ground rules that keep a balance between the effort to reduce dangerous speech and unnecessarily curtailing freedom of expression. How this can be achieved will be discussed in the next section.

4. Digitalisation in thematic terms: How National Dialogues can shape the use of digital technologies

This section will briefly discuss some of the most important issues related to digitalisation as a theme, or topic of dialogue. While digitalisation does not usually feature as a prominent agenda item, it nonetheless relates to several other concerns that tend to be discussed during National Dialogues. How conflict parties, political actors, and society more broadly use digital technologies and how governments regulate the digital sphere can directly impact the prospects for a peaceful political settlement. National Dialogues can provide an opportunity to discuss these issues.

4.1. Thematic considerations in the exploration and preparation phase

Contemporary armed conflicts and political crises are clearly manifest on social media, where narratives about the conflict or crisis shape how conflict stakeholders and ordinary citizens make sense of the situation and efforts to resolve it. It has been widely documented that social media contributes to further political polarisation and makes political dialogue processes more difficult because it can 'lock' social media users in 'echo chambers', from where they have difficulties assessing and relating to alternative views and arguments. Social media is also increasingly used to destabilise and sabotage political processes and mobilise for unrest and violence through the coordinated spreading of hate speech and disinformation. Hate speech and disinformation campaigns tend to be rolled out by conflict parties or their proxies, particularly before formal political

processes, such as democratic elections or peace negotiations. Such 'information warfare' also forms part of many conflict parties' soft power repertoire, aimed, for instance, at seeding hatred between ethnic or religious groups. Even when armed violence is absent, such efforts can complicate or derail dialogue efforts.

This means there is a need to reduce the harmful effects of social media use, in both its organised and organic manifestations, in advance of National Dialogues. In recent years, mediation support actors have increasingly facilitated efforts to reach agreements between conflict parties and stakeholders that may help to curb problematic social media behaviours. For instance, a local peace agreement to promote National Dialogue in Yei, South Sudan, signed in 2017, aims to "reduce hate speech/propaganda and misinformation of communities including on social media" (Government of Yei River State and SPLA-IO 2017). The ceasefire agreement between the cities of Tripoli and Tarhuna in Libya, signed in 2018, states that all parties should "adhere to spreading a message of de-escalation, tolerance, and reform, and that they will reject the pages on social media sites that call for fighting and sedition" (City of Tarhuna and City of Tripoli 2018). In the lead-up to the LPDF in 2020, the Joint Military Committee, a negotiating body composed of conflict party representatives, committed to creating a sub-committee that would "follow up on hate speech" on social media and "pursue the necessary actions" (Libyan Army of the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army of the General Command of the Armed Forces 2020). Moreover, the rules of procedure for the Syrian constitutional committee

included a clause committing the parties to good social media behaviour. Establishing similar ground rules would be equally relevant in the preparation phase of National Dialogues. In addition, more comprehensive 'cyber ceasefires' that include commitments to reduce offensive cyber operations against infrastructures, data, and internet connectivity are also increasingly being incorporated into efforts to terminate armed conflict, and they may play an essential role in enabling a conducive environment for dialogue (see Kane and Clayton 2021).

4.2. Thematic considerations during the process and the implementation phase

The negative effects of digital technologies and social media on peaceful coexistence can also be addressed during or through broad-based dialogues. Past National Dialogue outcome documents included provisions that outsource the related political reforms to legislative bodies. For instance, the Kenyan National Dialogue and Reconciliation Process called for the finalisation of a hate speech bill and a review of the Media Act (Government/PNU and ODM 2008). At the time of writing, there is no known example of a National Dialogue process that puts digitalisation directly on the agenda. However, comparable dialogue efforts supported by third parties offer inspiration and lessons learned. For instance, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the HD Centre supported the establishment of a 'citizen assembly' composed of 50 randomly selected citizens who developed a charter on responsible social media use. The charter defines standards for Bosnia's political actors, social media platforms, the media and journalists, social media users, and international and public institutions to enable more constructive social media engagement. It formulated a vision for a safe online space, discouraging hate speech, disinformation and the use of bots and trolls on social media during the upcoming elections. After its completion, the document was presented to decision-makers to create political buy-in, and

a mechanism was established to monitor its implementation (HD Centre 2022).

Several common topics of National Dialogues increasingly also pertain to digitalisation. Issues of social equality, socio-economic justice, social cohesion, and inclusion are increasingly determined by the availability, accessibility, and regulation of digital infrastructures, as well as by digital literacy. The outcome document of the Kenyan National Dialogue, for instance, calls for the "increasing availability" of "appropriate technologies to create an enabling environment for poor communities to take part in wealth creation" (Government/PNU and ODM 2008). While the document does not make direct reference to digitalisation, it is not difficult to see how comparable future documents may require the inclusion of provisions on digital technologies. Moreover, political issues such as governance arrangements, the division of power, checks and balances, and civil rights will impact how digitalisation affects peaceful coexistence. National Dialogues provide an opportunity to voice concerns about digital authoritarianism, such as internet surveillance, filtering, censorship, or shutdowns. They can also offer a forum to articulate demands to strengthen digital rights and internet freedoms. For instance, the Yemen National Dialogue outcome document called for constitutional provisions to criminalise the possession of "electronic interception devices" or their use to conduct "surveillance of citizens", and to uphold the "freedom and confidentiality of communications in all forms" (General Congress Party; Joint Meeting Parties; Ansar Allah and al-Hiraak 2014). This suggests that future National Dialogues will likely require a mainstreaming and further detailing of concerns about the adverse effects of digitalisation and the potentially malevolent uses of digital technologies in their thematic deliberations – for instance, through a dedicated thematic working group.

5. Conclusion and outlook

National Dialogues are shaped by digitalisation – and National Dialogues can shape digitalisation. While many dialogue efforts are still carried out predominantly 'offline', digital technologies play a growing role through ubiquitous use and by providing specialised applications. In some cases, digital platforms have already become indispensable for implementing or maintaining National Dialogue efforts. This paper aimed to encourage an engagement with the effects of digitalisation in both procedural and thematic terms. It suggested that we should not think about digital technologies solely as providing specific solutions or creating certain problems, but that a more comprehensive and profound reflection on the implications of digitalisation for present and future political crises and conflicts is required.

In contemporary conflicts and political crises, digital technologies are often associated with some of the most central problems that stand in the way of more peaceful political futures. In many recent National Dialogues – and likely in many future ones – digital infrastructures and social media have led to increasing polarisation, they have been used to mobilise for violence, and they play a considerable role in oppressing political oppositions and stifling dissent. At the same time, digital technologies can be employed to counter these challenges. For instance, they are used to facilitate dialogue, build trust and foster consensus, they can be leveraged to create a better understanding of the needs and interests of stakeholders and populations, and they can help increase the transparency of processes. Conversely, where digital technologies are employed to enhance National Dialogues, potential negative effects and new challenges are likely to emerge. Increasing inclusion for some parts of the population through digital means will most likely lead to the exclusion of others. And where online surveys are used to gather information about popular grievances, the chances are that this information may be accessed by malevolent actors keen to inhibit transformative change. The paper summarised the most important

trade-offs and pointed out how they emerge in practice when attempts are made to leverage digital technologies in support of National Dialogues. For sure, each of the instrumental uses of digital technology can help to improve dialogue processes. However, the aim of this paper was not to produce a checklist but to encourage dialogue conveners and support actors to go beyond a concern with single solutions or problems and look at the bigger picture in a self-reflexive manner. What are the specific problems that you identify in your context? Which solutions do you and others propose? And which new problems may emerge from them? And just as importantly, what do you risk overlooking, when focusing on single solutions or problems of digitalisation?

These questions matter for the procedural aspects of National Dialogues, but they matter even more for the thematic work that happens in and during a National Dialogue. In other words, those who convene and support National Dialogues should aim to move beyond a concern with single trade-offs, and towards enabling trajectories of digitalisation that can in fact contribute to more peaceful futures. While digitalisation will undoubtedly lead to an uptake of digital 'tools' that can enhance National Dialogues – by promoting inclusivity, empowering marginalised groups, providing better information, or enabling new forms of dialogue facilitation, for example – the more challenging part is fostering a dialogue not only *with* digital tools but *about* digital technologies and digitalisation. Taking up this challenge means engaging with the many thematic aspects that are often part of conflict and crisis – and to which digitalisation increasingly contributes. No matter if it concerns the catalysts or means of violence, such as hate speech and disinformation on social media, or its deeper drivers, such as inequality in digital access or digital authoritarianism – how to respond to digitalisation and how to leverage its peacebuilding potential will increasingly feature on the agenda of National Dialogues for decades to come.

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