

2025

# **AN ASSESSMENT OF THE ETHIOPIAN NATIONAL DIALOGUE AGENDA-GATHERING: INCLUSIVITY, PARTICIPATION, CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES**

## **Activities Assessment Report II**

This report covers the national dialogue agenda-gathering process convened by the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission, in collaboration with other stakeholders.



**CARD**  
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## **About CARD**

The Center for the Advancement of Rights and Democracy (CARD) is a board-led, for-not-profit organization registered in Ethiopia under the Civil Societies Law 1113/2019 with registry number 4307. CARD acquired its legal personality on 24 July 2019.

CARD aspires to see Ethiopia where democratic culture flourished on human rights values and has been working with a mission to empower citizens and groups of citizens to ensure their ability to promote and defend human rights and build democratic governance in Ethiopia.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Ethiopian National Dialogue represents a historic opportunity to advance democratic governance, strengthen social cohesion, and ensure that diverse voices shape the country's future. Established under Proclamation No. 1265/2021, the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) was mandated to confront Ethiopia's deep political and social divisions through a structured, nationwide dialogue aimed at building national consensus (*hagerawi megbabat*).

Subsequent to CARD's previous reports, this report provides an assessment of the ENDC's agenda-gathering process, with a particular focus on inclusivity, and participation. Grounded in deliberative democracy theory, the analysis applies a multi-pillar framework—conceptual, legal, and institutional—to evaluate inclusivity and participation both in terms of quantitative representation and qualitative voice.

Key findings highlight notable progress in broadening participation, with its emphasis on bottom-up approach- resulting in political parties, civil society, women, youth, marginalized groups and other sections of society increasingly engaged in the dialogue platforms organized at regional and federal levels. Efforts to expand inclusivity are evident, particularly during regional and federal agenda-gathering phases. However, unevenness in participant selection and transparency in communication continue to surface as a challenge during discussions among citizens. The report identifies emerging opportunities to reinforce trust, including clearer communication strategy, stronger regional equity, and enhanced support for civil society and marginalized actors engagement.

Ultimately, the success of Ethiopia's national dialogue depends not only on inclusivity and representation but on ensuring that participation is meaningful, transparent, and trusted. By documenting both achievements and gaps, this report provides actionable evidence for policymakers, organizers, and partners committed to safeguarding the integrity of one of the country's most consequential democratic processes.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Conceptual Inclusivity:** A close reading of the concepts used to articulate the Ethiopian national dialogue reveals that conceptual inclusivity is achieved. The Ethiopian national dialogue introduces two key concepts—*mikekker* and *weyeyet*—which together create a comprehensive conceptual framework. This framework is versatile enough to structure both formal political dialogues and broader social conversations, including acts of communal mourning and the active listening required to address grievances. Etymologically the term *mikekker* embodies a forward-looking approach focused on preventing future crises. In contrast, *weyeyet* adopts a retrospective stance, emphasizing healing and restoration. The governing proclamation, through the careful deployment of these terms, is neither restrictive nor exclusionary. Instead, it establishes a conceptual depth for an inclusive and open-ended foundation for national discourse.

**Broad Legal Framework and Mandate:** The proclamation establishing the ENDC defines dialogue using the culturally nuanced terms *Hagerawi Mikekker* (national consultation) and *Weyeyet* (deep deliberation), encompassing both future-solving and past-healing. The proclamation introduced core principles, such as; inclusivity, transparency, impartiality, and credibility reflecting the conceptual depth of the ND. Moreover, operational flexibility introduced in the proclamation allowing the ENDC to determine its own procedures and add necessary principles, allowing for adaptive management.

**The State as a Constrained Convener-Elite Ambivalence and Mass mobilization:** The Ethiopian case introduces the paradox of the state as a “constrained convener.” The state, which is often a primary actor in the previous and current conflicts, acts as the architect and funder of the dialogue meant to address grievances against it. The proclamation was enacted by the House of Peoples’ Representatives (HoPR), an institution dominated by the incumbent ruling party. This role limits the ENDC ability to be perceived as a neutral arbiter and explains the widespread skepticism among opposition groups. Regardless of its operational design that seemingly reverse this paradox, this inherent contradiction has been repeatedly mentioned as affecting the perceived neutrality and legitimacy of the ENDC from the outset. This resulted in an ambivalent position for the political elite despite mass mobilization in the national dialogue. It suggests that for a state-led dialogue to gain legitimacy, it needs to cede significant operational and oversight control to other non-state actors in the upcoming national plenary.

**Institutional Innovation:** The ENDC adopted a largely bottom-up design for the process, progressing from Woreda-level consultations to a National Plenary. This structure, complemented by strategic partnerships with associate stakeholders (e.g., Inter-religious Councils of Ethiopia, Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council, National Edir's Council, Ethiopian Teachers Association and Ethiopian Political Parties Joint Council) and an independent Advisory Council, successfully mobilized a significant number of participants from diverse societal segments. As such, the Ethiopian National Dialogue process presents a powerful case study that moves beyond the theoretical dichotomy of “top-down” versus “bottom-up” models. The analysis reveals a more complex and hybrid reality, leading to several key conceptual conclusions. The ENDC was conceived and launched from the top (state power) but was operationally designed to function from the bottom up. This creates an inherent tension that can be made productive.

**Quantitative Success, Qualitative Challenges:** The process achieved a notable scale of participation, with thousands of Ethiopians engaged across regions. Quota systems and parallel agenda-setting sessions by civil society networks (e.g., women's and youth groups) enhanced the presence of marginalized groups in the ND process. Yet advocates indicate the absence of agenda or participants on behalf of children, students, and children with special needs. Moreover, the translation of this *presence* into influential *voice* was hampered by elite-dominated communication styles and a lack of innovative facilitation to empower grassroots participants.

**Structural Barriers Persist:** The report identifies a critical gap in equity-based interventions. The Ethiopian national dialogue's design lacked mechanisms to overcome socio-economic barriers to participation, such as providing stipends, childcare, or transport, which limited the ability of the most marginalized communities to engage fully. The pragmatic decisions mainly paying stipends for groups gradually adopted to minimize the structural barriers however were impressive during agenda gathering and consultative gatherings.

**Top-down and Bottom-up Equation:** The ENDC's genesis from a state-dominated political structure initially undermined its credibility. This origin pushed away political elites but at the same time engages it differently. While its operational design sought to mitigate this, the process remained susceptible to elite exclusion, and the failure to integrate armed groups. Despite convergence of the two approaches, the top-down (during the conception of the national dialogue process) and bottom-up approaches (agenda gathering and participant selections), it is yet to result in the inclusion of the armed groups and opposition groups that distanced from the process.

**The Pluralization of the Deliberative Space:** A significant conceptual finding is the emergence of a vibrant ecosystem of deliberation around the official national dialogue process. Civil society networks (e.g., Timret, Ubuntu) did not just participate in the state-sanctioned process; they created their own parallel, complementary deliberative spaces. This pluralization—where multiple, overlapping dialogues occur—enhances overall inclusivity by capturing agendas that the official process might miss. The effectiveness of the overall national dialogue, therefore, depends less on the ENDC's monopoly over the process and more on its willingness to formally recognize and integrate these pluralized outputs into a cohesive whole.

# 01 INTRODUCTION

## 1.1. Background and Context of the Report

Ethiopia has long grappled with deep-seated political, ethnic, and social divisions, prompting repeated calls for national reconciliation and dialogue.<sup>1</sup> Various domestic and international actors, including opposition groups like the Oromo Federalist Congress (OFC), have been advocating for an inclusive political platform to address the country's protracted conflicts.<sup>2</sup> Since 2018, initiatives such as the Multi-stakeholder Initiative for National Dialogue (MIND) have sought to position national dialogue as a key peacebuilding instrument.<sup>3</sup>

In response, the Ethiopian government established the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) through Proclamation No. 1265/2021, with a mandate to facilitate a structured and inclusive national dialogue. The proclamation acknowledges the existence of profound disagreements among political elites and society, framing the dialogue to “resolve differences, foster national consensus, and restore social trust.” The ENDC's objectives are ambitious, aiming not only to address immediate conflicts but also to “lay a foundation for sustainable peace, democratic governance, and a legitimate state.”<sup>4</sup>

This study examines the inclusivity of the ENDC's agenda-gathering process, using a mixed-methods approach (document analysis, key informant interviews, stakeholder consultations, ethnographic observations, and inclusivity audits) to assess representation and identify gaps. The research seeks to provide actionable recommendations for enhancing participation and ensuring that the ENDC's outcomes reflect Ethiopia's diverse societal fabric. This research seeks to assess the ENDC's adherence to inclusive governance principles while proposing actionable reforms to strengthen Ethiopia's national dialogue process. The following are the major questions guiding the study:

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1 Dawit Yohannes and Meressa K Dessu 2020 National dialogues in the Horn of Africa: lessons for Ethiopia's political transition ISS <https://issafrica.org/research/east-africa-report/national-dialogues-in-the-horn-of-africa-lessons-for-ethiopias-political-transition>

2 Key informant one 2025

3 Key informant interviews in 2024 with civil society leader, opposition political parties

4 FDRE HPR Proclamation No. 1265/2021 The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission Establishment Proclamation

- To what extent has the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) ensured inclusivity and transparency in its agenda-gathering process, particularly for marginalized groups such as women, youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), and ethnic and occupational minorities?
- What are the conceptual, legal, discursive, operational, and structural barriers limiting the engagement of marginalized groups in the agenda-gathering phase?
- How far does the ENDC's institutional framework facilitate inclusive and participatory decision-making during the agenda gathering phase?

## 1.2. Methodology

This study employs a multi-modal qualitative research design to critically evaluate the inclusivity and transparency of the Ethiopian National Dialogue agenda collection process. The methodology is designed to capture both the operational realities and the conceptual underpinnings of the dialogue through iterative data collection across two phases (2024-2025).

### Data Collection Methods:

**Ethnographic Engagement:** The primary source of data is immersive, non-participant and participant observation of: Dialogue Sessions: Observing agenda-gathering meetings (organized by scholars and civil society) and various consultative workshops at multiple levels. Conferences and Workshops: Attending public forums, stakeholder conferences, and capacity-building workshops related to the national dialogue to observe discourse and power dynamics among elites and organizers.

**In-Depth Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):** Two rounds of semi-structured interviews conducted with approximately 10 core stakeholders per round to track evolving perspectives. Some of the interviews were conducted through phone conversation. The interviews also focused on process interface between the ND design and other peace-building infrastructures, initial challenges, and perceptions of inclusivity. Respondents include ENDC commissioners, civil society leaders and stakeholder's peace and peace-building in Ethiopia and selected facilitators. On the agenda gathering platform and institutional design considering inclusivity, legitimacy, participation and transparency. Respondents were purposively selected from the national dialogue commission, political parties, civil societies, facilitators, and academics.

## Document and Conceptual Analysis:

**Legal and Policy Review:** This assessment report on agenda collection utilized a close reading of Proclamation No. 1265/2021, ENDC procedural guidelines, and official reports.

## Conceptual Interpretation (Conceptual Genealogy):

Tracing the etymology and political usage of key Amharic terms like *Hagerawi Megbabat*, *Mikekker*, and *Weyeyet* to understand their meanings and potential meaning that can be mobilized towards inclusion and transformational politics.

**ENDC Website and Other Media Reports:** The research productively uses the medial reports, website and other platforms<sup>5</sup>.

## Theoretical Application and Data Analysis:

Continuous contextualization of empirical findings was made within the framework of deliberative democracy theory. Data was analyzed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach. Interview transcripts, field notes from observations, and documents were coded and analyzed to identify recurring themes, tensions, and patterns related to the core pillars of inquiry: conceptual, legal, and institutional inclusivity. The theoretical framework provided a lens to interpret these themes, ensuring the analysis moves beyond description to critical explanation. The report is presented in validation workshop organized involving reviewers of the report, representative of ENDC, civil society, scholars and stakeholders of the ND.<sup>6</sup> Comments were used to revise this final report.<sup>7</sup>

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5 The regular radio show on Sheger Radio, mainly Sheger café that hosted the renown scholars Dr Tekalegn Woldemariam has shaped the report in many terms.

6 Validation workshop organized by CARD, September August 28, 2025

7 This elaborative methodology section added after the validation workshop based on the recommendation from participants

# 02 THEORY AND PRAXIS OF INCLUSIVITY

## 2.1. Inclusivity in Dialogue and Deliberation

Within the expanding literature on national dialogue, *inclusivity* emerges as a foundational concept. To fully appreciate its necessity in fostering organic, and effective dialogue, an examination of theoretical and comparative perspectives is essential. For this purpose, deliberative democracy theory provides a valuable normative framework for understanding inclusive political processes, particularly in conflict transformation and the establishment of new political orders.<sup>8</sup>

Deliberative democracy has sparked extensive debate in Western political theory, while also finding distinct interpretations in Eastern contexts, such as within the discourse on “democracy with Chinese characteristics.” Without delving deeply into these nuanced debates, a summary suffices for our objectives. Proponents of deliberative democracy argue that it fosters inclusivity while mitigating elitism.<sup>9</sup> Rather than excluding elites, it transcends purely procedural and rationalist models by incorporating dispositional elements, recognizing participants as social and political beings rather than merely private, rational actors. Democratic deliberation, in this view, is not solely a means to consensus but a pathway to pluralistic outcomes. Its aspirations extend beyond agreement, encompassing voting, negotiation, and other forms of political engagement.

Critically, deliberative theorists contend that deliberation should embrace pluralism by striving for *metaconsensus*, which is a mutual recognition of the legitimacy of differing values, preferences, judgments, and discourses.<sup>10</sup> This conceptualization serves as a rebuttal to critiques from radical democratic theories, particularly those rooted in agonistic democracy, which challenge deliberative democracy’s emphasis on rational consensus over enduring conflict.<sup>11</sup>

8 Kuyper J., (2018) “The Instrumental Value of Deliberative Democracy – Or, do we have Good Reasons to be Deliberative Democrats?”, *Journal of Public Deliberation* 14(1). doi: <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.291>

9 Curato, N., J. Dryzek, S. Ercan, C. Hendriks, and S. Niemeyer. 2017. “Twelve Key Findings in Deliberative Democracy Research.” *Daedalus* 146, no. 3: 28–38. [https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED\\_a\\_00444](https://doi.org/10.1162/DAED_a_00444).

10 Curato 2017

11 MOUFFE, CHANTAL. “Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?” *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745–58. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40971349>.

The Chinese deliberative democracy is articulated as socialist deliberative democracy, which emphasizes the leadership of the vanguard party, the Communist Party of China. It is defined as a continuous integration of socialist deliberative democracy with Chinese characteristics. This system promotes a context of a relaxed, stable, and harmonious political environment, along with the institutionalization and standardization of governance. It combines electoral democracy within a single party framework and deliberative democracy, which is innovatively applied at the grassroots level. This approach features a blend of multiparty cooperation and political consultation, all operating under the principles of democratic centralism, where the leadership of the vanguard party is respected while fostering local-level deliberation. Furthermore, it embodies the universality of socialist democracy, with orderly political participation that continually adapts to the actual requirements of China's societal development.<sup>12</sup> These abstracted theories of deliberative democracies-China's consultative model, which emphasizes *stability and top-down consensus*, and the Western liberal model, which prioritizes *pluralism and open contestation* are both centered on deliberation and inclusive participation. The aim could be towards conflict transformation or renewing social contract.<sup>13</sup>

Noting the strong state and party tradition on one hand the presence of oppositional political and social critique on the other in Ethiopia make both the western and Chinese tradition relevant to build broader conceptual and theoretical canvas to analyze the progress of Ethiopian ND. Our goal is to explore ways of maximizing inclusivity and participation; it is relevant to see both traditions as different ways of democratic experiment. Deliberative democratic theories offer a commendable framework for inclusive political dialogue, as seen in Ethiopia's National Dialogue (ND), but its success hinges on whether it can transcend formal inclusion to address deep-seated structural inequalities. Historically, marginalized groups such as women, peasants, workers, and ethnic communities have been excluded from meaningful political participation, and without deliberate efforts to dismantle power asymmetries, the ND risks reproducing these very hierarchies.

For deliberation to be truly transformative, it must go beyond elite-dominated discourse by empowering grassroots voices through creative spaces that transcend elite spaces. The critical question is whether such initiatives merely legitimize existing power structures or actively disrupt them. This distinction depends on the ND's willingness to institutionalize radical democratic reforms rather than settling for symbolic representation. Without practical participation that surfaces plural voices, even the most well-intentioned dialogue may reinforce exclusion rather than overcome it. Thus, the challenge lies in reimagining

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12 Wang, Zhongyuan, and Su Yun Woo. 2021. "Deliberative Representation: How Chinese Authorities Enhance Political Representation by Public Deliberation." *Journal of Chinese Governance* 7 (4): 583-615. doi:10.1080/23812346.2020.1870311.

13 Mandikwaza, 2025

deliberative democracy not just as a procedural exercise but as a mechanism for structural transformation, ensuring that Ethiopia's marginalized majority are not just heard but become decisive actors in shaping their political future. This would make national dialogue as a democratic experiment more transformative than reproductionist<sup>14</sup>

On the other hand, theoretically, one can locate the Ethiopian national dialogue with the boarder theory of conflict transformation as most of the conceptual apparatus constructed from this theoretical purchase. However, it also falls into the social contract theory given the dialogue aspiration also include redefining state society relation towards constructing new legitimate and credible state.<sup>15</sup> To transform the existing conflicts and to all negotiation towards new dispensation between state and society in a new political system the inclusion of all actors and stakeholders is indispensable.

## 2.2. Inclusivity Enhancing Models in National Dialogue

### 2.2.1. Institutional Design

Institutional design of national dialogue or any other deliberative democracy experiment needs to consider inclusion and participation as a very critical element. It emphasizes how national dialogue as a deliberative democracy can be made inclusive through structured systems and institutional design.<sup>16</sup> It includes creating effective incentives for marginalized citizens to participate and carefully designing frameworks to ensure fairness in both participant selection and deliberation methods. By embedding inclusivity into the system itself, this approach aims to remove systemic barriers to engagement. For example, institutional design may incorporate targeted mobilization and various other inclusion tools such as quotas, symbolic empowerment, direct contact, and facilitation spaces.<sup>17</sup> The issues of financing of inclusion and participation for example also can be seen from this angle.

<sup>14</sup> The debate concerning democratic experiments at local and national levels features two opposing theoretical stances regarding inclusion. The first, referred to as the reproductionist view, holds that in structurally asymmetric societies—such as those under capitalist systems—true inclusion is unattainable. Proponents argue that democratic institutions and experiments inevitably mirror and perpetuate underlying structural inequalities. In contrast, the transformativist perspective maintains that deliberative democratic projects, even at the local level, can foster genuine transformation. Transformativists contend that such initiatives can create new possibilities for inclusion and promote egalitarian outcomes. The proposed transformation list outlines multiple models to promote inclusion and advance egalitarian aspirations: conceptual and legal framework, institutional design, equality in the standard of participation, and equity or parity.

<sup>15</sup> Mandikwaza, 2025.

<sup>16</sup> Pogrebinschi, Thamy. 2016. "Comparing Deliberative Systems: An Assessment of 12 Countries in Latin America." :

<sup>17</sup> García-Espín, Patricia. "Can Participatory Democracy Become 'Inclusive'? Class, Mobilization and Voice in Participatory Institutions." *European Political Science Review* 17, no. 2 (2025): 169–84. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1755773924000262>.

### **2.2.2. Equity or Parity**

The equity or parity model focuses on the structural inequalities that limit participation. It examines the underlying social and economic barriers that impede equal involvement. Deliberative democracy experiments that adopt this approach must assess these background disparities and create targeted interventions, such as financial support, accessibility measures, or outreach programs, to make participation feasible for all. Examples may include workplace leave, provision of free transport, daycare opportunities, and certification of participants as civic citizens, measurable in economic and political terms.

### **2.2.3. Equality in Participation**

This model tackles exclusionary cultural and communicative practices. It aims to dismantle norms that privilege certain groups while marginalizing others, particularly in multicultural societies. By challenging these exclusive practices, whether through language accessibility, inclusive facilitation, or representation quotas, the goal is to create a deliberative space where diverse voices are not only present but also empowered to shape outcomes. For example, implementing oral rather than written texts; providing multilingual spaces; establishing translation options; and making communication in democratic projects accessible to all people, especially the working class.

In summary, these three interventions can enhance the inclusion of all marginalized sections of society in political spaces, deliberation, discussion, and dialogue. We measure the extent of inclusion through a combination of *presence* and *voice*. *Presence* refers to the symbolic and quantitative inclusion of societal sections in the project, such as attendance at assembly meetings and recognition as community members. In contrast, *voice* measures the quality and depth of inclusion and representation. This involves assessing the substantive contributions of participants in dialogue or any deliberative democracy initiative. See the table as a summary drawn by the authors.

## 03

# THE ETHIOPIAN NATIONAL DIALOGUE: CONCEPTUAL AND LEGAL DIMENSIONS

In this section, we interpret what the ongoing national dialogue in Ethiopia entails, examining it through conceptual, institutional, legal, and political lenses. This analysis serves as a foundation for the synchronous exploration of the national dialogue. We begin by discussing two closely related Amharic concepts; *Hagerawi Mikekker* and *Hegerawi Weyeyet*.

## 3.1. Conceptual Dimension

### 3.1.1. Hagerawi Mikekker

*Hagerawi mikekker* is an Amharic term that signifies the ongoing national dialogue in Ethiopia. In the Amharic dictionary, the word *mikekker* means to give something or to teach someone what to do or not to do, primarily as a means of resolving a problem and winning someone over.<sup>18</sup> Its equivalent English is advice.<sup>19</sup> Usually it is done by elder or a priest or a friend or an advisor (*balemual*). In this sense directed to someone who needs it or deserve the lesson or the idea for resolving a problem or winning the struggle.

There is an assumed power of knowledge and wisdom possessed by those who offer advice. As the Amharic saying goes, “a king without an advisor will not reign for more than a year” (*Mekar yelelew negus yale andamet aynegis*). However, *mikekker* can sometimes have negative connotations, as reflected in the saying: “he received *mikekker* and broke the reconciliation” (*mkar selegebaw Erkun aferese*). Regardless of whether it is positive or negative, there will always be affected by the *mekir* that comes from those who are knowledgeable. In this regard the warning proverb is worth noting “give a counsel to one twice, then let one learn the hard way” (*Mekaraw Mekaraw embi kale mekara yeimekerw*).<sup>20</sup> Hence *mikekker* inform consultation and advising.<sup>21</sup>

Another version of this concept is *mikekker* which often denotes a horizontal social conversation about various issues. In this context, there are no clear givers or receivers; both parties are engaged in a dialogue or consultation without one assuming a position of exclusive knowledge or experience. The existence of such a term reflects the presence

18 Desta Täklä Wäld. Addis Yä Amar ñña Mäz gäbä Qalat. Addis Ababa: Artistic Printers, 1970:770

19 Girma Getahun 2016. *Giyge's Advanced Supplement to Concise Amharic-English Dictionalres*. Addis Ababa:Kibur Books

20 Girma 2016

21 Girma 2016, 37

of established social practices. However, we should be cautious not to romanticize the idea that conversations, discussion, and dialogues always occur within a balanced social context. Indeed, some members of a community could be deterred from participating; for instance, children and women can be discouraged, as encapsulated in the saying that to consult with a woman is to feast and get drunk (*Keset memker , degso mesker*). Hence the second meaning of the *mikekker* as discussion and dialogue is relevant and appropriate for making sense of *Hagerawi Mikekker* as national dialogue. It is a horizontal discussion about issues relevant at national level.

### 3.1.2. Weyeyet

The Amharic term *weyeyet* denotes discussion and a facilitator who guides formal discussions and deliberations are called *awayay*<sup>22</sup>. Furthermore, the proclamation also defines the term accordingly. In older dictionaries, *weyeyet* signifies a conversation that occurs after a distressing event, particularly a death. The focus of such discussions is on distress (*tekaze*), grief (*hazen*) and mourning (*leqso*). It involves expressing grievances to others and listening to those who are grieving. Additionally, it encompasses sharing experiences related to the cause of the grief and the ultimate goal includes sympathy and condolences (*masetesazen*).<sup>23</sup>

## 3.2. Legal Dimension

The Ethiopian national dialogue introduces two key concepts: *mikekker* and *weyeyet*, which together open a broad conceptual canvas and form a comprehensive framework that can be used for both political dialogues and social conversations inclusive of mourning and actively listening to the grievances of fellow citizens. The proclamation, that established the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (Proclamation No. 1265/2021, defines *hagerawi mikekker* as multiple *weyeyetoch*. The proclamation recognizes discussions and dialogues occurring at regional and federal level under the auspicious of the commission as *Hagerawi Mikekker*. However, as mentioned earlier, the term *mikekker* embodies a forward-looking approach that seeks to prevent potential crises, whereas *weyeyet* takes a retrospective stance, emphasizing healing and restoration. The proclamation, along with the terms it employs, is neither restrictive nor exclusionary; instead, it is inclusive and open-ended.

As it is stated in the proclamation, the vision of the commission is to facilitate what is known as *hagerawi megbabat*, which translates to national consensus. This agreement and consensus focus primarily on fundamental issues. This makes it instead of pluralist

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22 Girma 2016, 251

23 Desta 1970, 429

journey the possibility of dialogue homogenized through the narrow aspiration of consensus. Hence, ENDC's mandate to build *hagerawi Megbabat* (national consensus) reveals a fundamental tension at the heart of the process. The pursuit of consensus, while aspirational, risks marginalizing irreconcilable differences and deep-seated conflicts, echoing critiques from agonistic democratic theory which posits that politics is inherently about enduring conflict rather than its resolution through rational agreement.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, the ways in which *hagerawi* is translated as national relevance or something relevant to the federal level is very problematic and creates tension between the local and national. The ENDC process likely to encounter a fundamental local-national dilemma, where the imperative to generate a focused national agenda, (as seen federal agenda), risked marginalizing the very local grievances that give the dialogue its legitimacy.

The proclamation also acknowledges the differences and disagreements that exist between the elites and society on one hand, and among different segments of society on the other. It emphasizes that resolving these differences regarding fundamental issues requires a broad-based, inclusive dialogue among the people. The aim is to build trust, foster a culture of collaboration, and renew the declining social capital and values in Ethiopia. The *raison d'être* of the commission is to organize and facilitate the dialogue independently and efficiently. The proclamation from the outset underlines capacity and impartiality, which are necessary for making the commission legitimate.

The principles outlined in the proclamation reflect the broad conceptual framework discussed earlier. Key principles such as inclusivity, transparency, impartiality, credibility, and tolerance are recognized as international standards for any national dialogue. Additionally, principles like context sensitivity, along with a focus on social values and knowledge, broaden the conceptual scope, facilitating meaningful social conversations. Although these two principles are fewer in number compared to those used in political dialogue, they are essential for fostering an inclusive environment. It is worth noting

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24 See Tegbaru Yared 2022 Ethiopia's national dialogue: reconciling competing approaches, ISS monograph <https://issafrica.org/research/east-africa-report/ethiopias-national-dialogue-reconciling-competing-approaches>

that incorporating additional principles, such as empathy, could further enrich this list of principles. Fortunately, the proclamation empowered the commission to add “principles it deems necessary”.

Model	Focus	Key Interventions	Example Measures
Conceptual	The discursive level	The width and depth of the concept and grammar used to articulate the ND	Interpretation and operationalization of concepts
Legal	The mandate and the possibility and limitation the law creates	Flexibility, pragmatism	Additional proclamation and innovations
Institutional Design	System structures & rules	Quotas, participant selection methods, facilitation, symbolic recognition	Sortation with demographic stratification, reserved seats for marginalized groups
Equity or Parity	Socioeconomic/ material barriers	Financial support, accessibility measures, outreach	Stipends, childcare, free transport, civic participation certificates
Equality in Participation	Cultural/ communicative exclusion	Inclusive facilitation, language access, alternative formats (oral vs. written)	Multilingual dialogue, Translation possibilities, Inclusion advocacy by CSO and social groups

Table 1. Conceptual and theoretical devices used for evaluating the inclusive praxis of Ethiopian national dialogue agenda gathering.

# 04 ETHIOPIAN NATIONAL DIALOGUE'S INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN:

## 4.1. Top-down Design

The ENDC developed its institutional design within the context of a highly polarized political landscape. The demand for the national dialogue itself emerged primarily as an initiative driven by elites, initially reflecting the interests of opposition political parties and subsequently encouraged and tested by civil society organizations. Hence initially, it took a top down approach and has been receiving critique for this. Perhaps the first challenge it faced emanated from the birth of the national dialogue in this top down process.<sup>25</sup>

As indicated in the proclamation, the major objective of the national dialogue commission is to identify the root causes and topic of the difference on fundamental national issues through consultation and discussion or *weyeyet* and make them ready for the *mikekker*.<sup>26</sup> Moreover it aims to foster an effective national dialogue that builds *trust* and nurtures both vertical and horizontal *relationships*. This dialogue seeks to establish a *new democratic political system* and cultivate a *civic political culture*, providing the social and political foundation for sustainable solutions to current challenges and ensuring lasting *peace*. Ultimately, it aims to create a *national consensus* and a new *legitimate state* through dialogue while presupposing the major challenges that the country is facing and aspires to solve it. The scope combines the political which gravitate around the state power, and the social, the everyday relationship between the societies.

However, for the vision and object of the national dialogue to be achieved, the technical, institutional and procedural design of the national dialogue must fit to the conceptual and the legal framework. Towards achieving these objectives, the commission came up with a distinct framework or design for the national dialogue. This is the technical aspect of the national dialogue first presented and discussed in this section as a base of evaluating its implication on inclusivity and transparency in the agenda gathering process.

<sup>25</sup> Key informant 1 Opposition of political party leader

<sup>26</sup> Proclamation article 6

According to the proclamation (Article 9), most of the commission's activities are centered on the agenda. The dialogues, consultative meetings, and discussions all focus on the agendas to be generated from public discussions. The national plenary is dedicated to deliberating on the organized and filtered agendas. All discussion at local level in each regional states and the national plenary together inform *Hagerawi Mikekker*. Hence the triple stage template involving preparatory, dialogue and implementation phases at the global discourse of national dialogue seemingly difficult to apply here.<sup>27</sup> There is a tendency of stretching of END to fit this template as preparation stage, preparation ,dialogue and implementation stage.<sup>28</sup> The dialogue has already started given the first discussion about an agenda at the local level consider part of the national dialogue. Therefore, national plenary singularly does not inform a national dialogue, albeit it is the ultimate center of it.

National dialogue and all activities of the commission circulate around the agenda that would be identified through series of consultation, and discussions. One of the principles of the national dialogue is also about the depth and relevance of agenda items. One of the duties of the commission is crafting agenda for national deliberations mainly for the national dialogue conference or plenary (Proclamation, Article 9). Recognizing that the agenda is the central issue of the national dialogue in Ethiopia, the commission has developed a design to engage each locality and organize dialogue tables. This design employs a bottom-up approach, progressing from local communities or woredas to regional states, and ultimately culminating in a national plenary. It resembles a pyramid structure, where communities set the agenda, select representatives, and ultimately convene at regional or national levels.

## 4.2. Bottom-Up Design

Despite the much discussed view that the Ethiopia National Dialogue Commission originated from the center of state power, established by the House of Peoples' Representatives, largely dominated by the ruling party<sup>29</sup>, a close reading of the institutional design of the national dialogue reveals a new perspective. This perspective advocates for a bottom-up approach in design, particularly in agenda-gathering and institutionalizing inclusivity in participant selection. Two key priorities in this process are participant selection and the organization of dialogue sessions for agenda collection.

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27 Berghof Foundation. (2017). National Dialogue Handbook: A Guide for Practitioners. Burlin: Berghof Foundation Operations GmbH press.

28 ECSOC representatives presentation on the July 7 consultative workshop

29 Key informant one 2025

To ensure effective implementation, the Commission has established an institutional framework aligned with the goals of the national dialogue. This design reflects a bottom-up approach, a cornerstone of Ethiopia's national dialogue, ensuring representation across local, regional, and federal levels leading up to the national plenary. The bottom approach is crafter given the deep rooted nature of the conflicts in Ethiopia as articulated in the proclamation. The problem itself justifies the need for the bottom approach and creating of space for masses.<sup>30</sup> The participant selection process, central to this institutional design, is critical, as it directly shapes the inclusivity, credibility, legitimacy, and transparency of the entire dialogue.

To this end, the commission introduced an innovative approach that flipped the traditional top-down model on its head by implementing a bottom-up strategy aimed at enhancing the inclusion and participation of various segments of Ethiopian society. This strategy can be viewed as a meticulous method for fostering inclusion, even within a top-down framework of deliberative democracy.<sup>31</sup> This process reversed its appearance to resemble a controlled process of deliberative democracy governed by a dominant political party, similar to the controlled participation and consultation seen in the Chinese model of deliberation. The bottom-up approach said to exclude the major political elite. However, from each region the design enabled at least 330 participants who fall into elite category from universities and political parties' business or cultural community. All facilitators were university professors and hence as participants and facilitators involved.<sup>32</sup>

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30 Key informant 6 2025 Commission of ENDC

31 Key informant 5 facilitators Amhara region

32 Key informant 6 Commissioner ENDC

# 05 AGENDA GATHERING IN THE ETHIOPIAN NATIONAL DIALOGUE

## 5.1. Modality of Agenda Gathering

This section assesses how the participant selection and agenda gathering process unfolded in light of inclusivity and transparency. The process began at the lowest tier of local government, known as the *woreda*, to select participants and gather agendas. At the *woreda* level, the Commission aimed to select participants from various segments of society, such as *Idirs*, Occupational groups, teachers, community leaders and elders, youth, women, and the business community, among others. There is also one undefined room where local community can add as per their local and social context. The 8-10 rooms for each cleavage enabled diverse community members to participate in the dialogue process and allow ownership for each section of Ethiopia society.<sup>33</sup> During this process 1231 *woredas* were covered from 1333.<sup>34</sup> From *Woreda* to Zonal level and then to Regional level the same modality of participant selection is applied.

The local or *woreda*-level sessions were designed as breakout sessions for different segments of the community. Each session had a set agenda for dialogue and select participants for the plenary at the *woreda* level. Representatives then convened at the regional level for additional breakout sessions and plenary discussions. The regional or city administration level conference also established and organized the agenda, selecting participants for the national conference or plenary. Minutes were written and recorded at all levels, as per the proclamation such minutes will be submitted to HPR and Ethiopian archives and library service for preservation (Proclamation article 30) Minutes and document appropriately. Thousands of people took part in this process.<sup>35</sup> The design seems one fits all, but it also opened an addition space for tailoring the design to each local context. For example, displaced member of community also were given space.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Key informant 6 Commissioner of END

34 Representative of the ENDC Presentation on a workshop entitled “Consultative workshop among National Dialogue’s Cooperative Institution. July 17, 2025

35 Key informant 6 commissioner of END

36 Key informant 5 facilitator in Amhara reign

At the Federal level, participants selected included governmental and non-governmental organizations, councils, associations, federations representing various segments of society. Particularly, associations such as teachers' organizations; federations of university teachers; groups representing people with disabilities and elders' associations; networks of women for dialogue; and civil societies operating at the federal level, the House of People's Representatives; the House of the Federation; the federal court; national political parties; the national defense; federal police; religious institutions, celebrities, activists, and opinion makers, among others. In general, the Commission designed platforms to organize discussions across four tiers: federal, regional, city administrations, and the diaspora.

Considering this, one can argue that the presence of many diverse participants contributes to a high level of inclusion.<sup>37</sup> This measurement reflects only the presence or in-person attendance of people from different walks of life in the agenda-setting process. The high participation of individuals from various social groups, while keeping other factors constant, likely enhances the feeling of being recognized as members of the communities that these participants represent. This bottom-up approach also serves as political space where communities know, recognize each other and with the national concerns and own the political process. This is unprecedented in top-down political trend in Ethiopia.<sup>38</sup> However critiques still see the vulnerability of the bottom -up approach for top-down manipulation.<sup>39</sup>

Despite efforts to engage with grassroots communities, a representative mode of participation remains essential. Therefore, participants are expected to represent both themselves and their respective communities. It was vital that participants maintain their connection with the local community to authentically reflect the aspirations of those they represent.

The commission achieved this agenda gathering and participant selection in all regions and city administration except the Tigray regional state. The commission had a visit and consultation meeting with stakeholders in Tigray. However, the success of Tigray yet to be determine given the participants demanded preconditions similar to other regions mainly participants in Amhara region.<sup>40</sup> The commission is also engaging the diaspora as section of the Ethiopia community to collect agenda using various platforms including e-participation .<sup>41</sup> This bottom up approach took its own shape in each locality and depending on the context.

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37 Key informant 5 facilitator in Amhara region

38 Key informant 6 Commissioner ENDC

39 Key informant 1 Opposition political Party

40 Key informant 9 Scholars from Tigry , Mekele 2025

41 ENDC A Comprehensive call for Ethiopian and the Ethiopian Diaspora in North America, <https://ethiondc.org.et/en/a-comprehensive-call-for-ethiopian-and-the-ethiopian-diaspora-in-north-america/>

## 5.2. Role of Associate Stakeholders in the Agenda Gathering

The ENDC, while institutionalizing a bottom-up approach to participant selection and agenda collection, also emphasizes operational collaboration with stakeholders known as associate partners or *Tebabari Akalat*.<sup>42</sup> As the primary convenor and organizer of the national dialogue, the commission gradually developed the concept of mobilizing stakeholders for this initiative.<sup>43</sup> In 2022 it began by signing a memorandum of understanding with selected key stakeholders that play critical role in the national dialogue. The purpose of this partnership is to enhance participant engagement and contribute to the inclusivity of the dialogue.

These associate partners include various councils, such as the Ethiopian Council of Religious Institutions; Ethiopian Civil Society Council; Ethiopian Political Parties Joint Council; Ethiopian Teachers Association; Judges and a District representative from the court will be involved in the process.<sup>44</sup> These partners will have one vote including the head of the district. The district as lowest organ is represented because government is considering a stakeholder and the ND needs the active role of the government organs to make the dialogue possible. The representative of the joint council of political parties also represents the collective interest of Ethiopian political parties. The civil organizations were chosen for their strength and capacity to resist influence, as they actively engage in the polarized political landscape. The commission also expanded this partnership to include many grassroots social and community groups and leaders from each region and locality. These lists include clan leaders, elders, ingenious community organization, women association and peasant associations and networks.<sup>45</sup> In addition to their mobilizing capacity, the ideas coming from these stakeholders will enrich the dialogue process.<sup>46</sup> For example commissioners underlined the role if religious institution in cultivating social cohesion and culture of dialogue in Ethiopia<sup>47</sup>. Another commissioner for example, emphasized the role of digital medal in the national dialogue.<sup>48</sup> The commission gradually but effectively has mobilized associate partners, broadening its reach horizontally while embracing a bottom-up approach.

42 Presentations from presentations ENDC and ECSOC in July 7 2025 consultative workshop

43 Key informant 3 CSO youth based Addis Ababa 2025

44 END Participants in the consultation process <https://ethiondc.org.et/%e1%8b%a8%e1%88%9d%e1%8a%ad%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%ad-%e1%88%82%e1%8b%b0%e1%89%b5-%e1%89%b0%e1%88%b3%e1%89%b3%e1%8d%8a%e1%8b%8e%e1%89%bd/>

45 ENDC 05/02/25 National consultation processes partners and their roles [https://ethiondc.org.et/%e1%89%a0%e1%88%80%e1%8c%88%e1%88%ab%e1%8b%8a-%e1%88%9d%e1%8a%ad%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%ad-%e1%88%98%e1%8b%b5%e1%88%a8%e1%8a%ad-%e1%88%81%e1%88%89%e1%88%9d-%e1%8a%a0%e1%88%b8%e1%8a%93%e1%8d%8a-%e1%8b%ad/](https://ethiondc.org.et/%e1%89%a0%e1%8a%a6%e1%88%ae%e1%88%9a%e1%8b%ab-%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%8d%e1%88%8d-%e1%8b%a8%e1%8b%88%e1%88%a8%e1%8b%b3-%e1%8b%a8%e1%88%9b%e1%8a%85%e1%89%a0%e1%88%a8%e1%88%b0%e1%89%a5-%e1%8a%ad%e1%8d%8d/)

46 <https://ethiondc.org.et/%e1%89%a0%e1%88%80%e1%8c%88%e1%88%ab%e1%8b%8a-%e1%88%9d%e1%8a%ad%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%ad-%e1%88%98%e1%8b%b5%e1%88%a8%e1%8a%ad-%e1%88%81%e1%88%89%e1%88%9d-%e1%8a%a0%e1%88%b8%e1%8a%93%e1%8d%8a-%e1%8b%ad/>

47 ENDC 27/06/2025 The Role of Religious Institutions is Vital to Achieving National Consensus - ENDC <https://ethiondc.org.et/en/the-role-of-religious-institutions-is-vital-to-achieving-national-consensus-endc/>

This pragmatic institutionalization of stakeholders also facilitated the involvement of grassroots participants for agenda-setting, thereby enhancing the inclusivity of the national dialogue.<sup>49</sup> One measure of the effectiveness of institutional design is its capacity to incorporate as diverse a range of actors as possible into the democratic project. Hence the praxis depicts a dense political platform from woreda to regional level where large numbers of participants were mobilized and stakeholders took part in enabling the agenda gathering process. All this made possible through public consultation.<sup>50</sup>

Stakeholders have advocated for and struggled for inclusion and foster a culture of participation in the national dialogue. In addition to utilizing spaces organized by the National Dialogue Commission, various stakeholders conducted their own parallel agenda-setting sessions. A notable example is the Network of Women for the National Dialogue, a ECSOC, Media Association, Political Parties, Ethiopian scholars organized their own dialogue sessions, provided training, generated agendas, and ultimately submitted those agendas to the commission. The role of civil society, advocacy and participation has been incredible, e.g. from EWWND.

### 5.3. Parallel Agenda Gathering Modalities

The ENDC was initially too cautious to allow other stakeholders to participate in the agenda-gathering process, believing that this activity was an exclusive mandate of the commission. However, it gradually recognized that the commission's capacity to effectively reach the diverse geographic spaces of Ethiopia was nearly impossible.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, various civil society organizations, such as the ECSOC, *Timret*, the Coalition for Women's Voices in the National Dialogue, and the Ubuntu Youth Peace Building Alliance, have emerged to play a vital role in this effort.<sup>52</sup> Gradually the agenda collection and submission made open for individuals and any concerned subject as a product of learning curve by the commission. Many civil society organizations also played an active and constructive role within the formally established framework under the auspices of the ENDC. They also mobilize and train the masses for the national dialogue in a parallel and plural channels and networks. They started first as training and awareness creation then pragmatically begun to collect agenda from their respective constituency.<sup>53</sup>

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49 Key informant 5 facilitator in Amhara region

50 Key informant 6 Commissioner ENDC

51 Key informant 3 CSO Youth based 2025

52 Key informant 2 CSO women based 2025

53 Key informant 3 and 4 2025

For example, *Timret*, the Coalition for Women’s Voices in the National Dialogue is one of the most active networks of civil society of women. Involving about 60 women civil society formed this network to open space for active participation of women in the national dialogue. This network crafted its own institutional design to make the national dialogue with active participation of Ethiopia women. The network training aims to facilitate dialogue among women at the local level through its program called formal consultation. By organizing community conversations, it engages women from diverse backgrounds in the national dialogue. The network has hosted discussion sessions with influential women and political leaders. It has mobilized women from ten regions and two cities, and is working towards organizing similar efforts in the remaining two regions—Amhara and Tigray.

The institutional design of this network exemplifies one possible way of institutionalizing inclusivity within any deliberative democracy project. *Timret* innovatively identified 18 categories of women, including peasants, housewives, businesswomen, journalists, youth, individuals with disabilities, and vulnerable groups. This methodology has enabled them to reach the grassroots level of women across ten regional states, along with the two cities. In comparison to the ENDC’s constituency, which consists of ten categories of potential participants, *Timret* offers a broader and more profound possibility for inclusive dialogue. Through this model, the network engaged 6,500 women who contributed to the first phase of the agenda, submitting a total of 2,700 proposals, with the top ten agendas being crafted and submitted. The major challenge they faced, in addition to the discouraging political culture regarding women’s roles in politics, was the recruitment of participants from member CSOs. To address this, they limited the number of members from each CSO to two, and each CSO took on the responsibility of recruiting women from the 18 designated categories.

The primary challenge they encountered, in addition to the discouraging political culture surrounding women’s roles in politics, was the recruitment of participants from member civil society organizations (CSOs). To address this issue, they limited the number of representatives from each CSO to two, and each organization was tasked with recruiting women from the 18 designated categories. Thanks to the efforts of the ENDC, *Timret*, and numerous other stakeholders, the federal level participation of women reached approximately 40%, while at the woreda and regional state levels; they were able to meet the minimum reserved quota of 30% for women. The minimum planned presence of women in the district and region level dialogue session could be made possible. This illustrates that institutional design alone does not guarantee a fully inclusive political project. The

existing asymmetries of power and political economy cannot be easily rectified simply by creating an open and encouraging political space. Therefore this institutional design should be complemented by other tools of inclusion.

Similarly, Ubuntu is a network of youth-based civil society organizations focused on national dialogue. In addition to advocating for youth participation in the national dialogue, Ubuntu has organized training and facilitation sessions in seven cities, recruiting youth from ten regional states, including Tigray. The network aims to craft a unified youth agenda for Ethiopia's national dialogue. The apathy and disinformation about the national dialogue is the major challenge they faced. However, they left their own mark through their active role in the national dialogue ecosystem.

The ECSOC, which serves as the umbrella organization for civil society organizations (CSOs) in the country, has been actively involved in the political landscape since its inception. The council has developed a framework for CSOs to contribute constructively to national dialogue.<sup>54</sup> It has fostered a relationship between CSOs and the NDC, as it is one of the associated partners of the ENDC. Similar to other networks, the council has provided training and facilitated dialogues primarily aimed at agenda-setting. Additionally, the council has submitted the agendas generated by civil society organizations and made these agendas public.

Networks of civil society organizations and federations of professional associations, such as The Coalition of Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations for Elections (CECOE),<sup>55</sup> Ethiopian university scholars, and The Ethiopian Media Council (FMC)<sup>56</sup>, many others conducted their agenda gathering sessions and have all submitted their agenda through the participation of their respective members.

This illustrates how the ENDC adopted a slow yet pragmatic, cautious but flexible approach in engaging stakeholders, primarily civil society organizations. This openness, pragmatism, and engagement can be seen as an institutional design and incentive for inclusion and enhanced participation. This enriched and pluralized the agenda gathering process by recognizing formal and informal dialogue processes that may or may not involve the ENDC.<sup>57</sup>

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54 Ethiopian Civil Society Organizations Council /ECSOC/ CSO's National Dialogue Engagement Framework February 2023

55 CECOIE sep 14 2023 conducted a National Dialogue Agenda Collection Forum <https://cecoie.org/cecoie-conducted-a-national-dialogue-agenda-collection-forum/>

56 EMC 11 February 2025 EMC officially submitted the agenda to the Ethiopian National Consultation Commission. <https://ethiopianmediacouncil.org/emc-officially-submitted-the-agenda-to-the-ethiopian-national-consultation-commission/>

57 Presentation by representative from ESCOC July 7 2025 consultative workshop

## 5.4. Advisory Council of the ENDC

Alongside the stakeholders who are direct participants and mobilizing forces of the national dialogue, the Commission established an Advisory Committee, which began its work on May 20, 2023. This committee was formed by including individuals distinguished in their professions, educational backgrounds, public acceptance, and contributions to their fields and country. The advisory committee is also another important institutional design that enriches the quality of the dialogue process. The committee has been providing comments and prescription to improve the process of the national dialogue.<sup>58</sup>

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58 END 04/23/2024 <https://ethiondc.org.et/%e1%8b%a8%e1%8a%ae%e1%88%9a%e1%88%bd%e1%8a%91-%e1%8b%a8%e1%8a%a0%e1%88%9b%e1%8a%ab%e1%88%aa-%e1%8a%ae%e1%88%9a%e1%89%b4-%e1%88%88%e1%8a%ae%e1%88%9a%e1%88%bd%e1%8a%91-%e1%88%9d%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%ad/>The Commission's Advisory Committee submitted a draft recommendation to the Commission Council

# 06 ANALYZING INCLUSIVENESS AND PARTICIPATION IN THE AGENDA GATHERING OF END

## 6.1. The Presence of the Participants in the Agenda Gathering

Mobilizing stakeholders is crucial for institutionalizing effective incentives for inclusive dialogue. This approach has undoubtedly enriched the dialogue sessions in various localities, regional states, and city administrations. The effectiveness of these parallel sessions can be measured, among other factors, by the engagement they fostered through their innovative organization of communities. The formal channels and parallel sessions successfully mobilized a significant number of people from diverse backgrounds to participate in the agenda-gathering dialogues. “I thought it would not be inclusive but when I participate at the local level I saw high level of inclusivity from diverse community at the local level.”<sup>59</sup> This high level of participation is a great achievement for the ENDC, especially when considering the quantitative aspect of attendance as a yardstick.<sup>60</sup>

For example in the agenda-gathering dialogue in Addis Ababa involved 121 representatives from various sectors of society, 228 representatives of institutions and associations, 128 representatives of government bodies, 52 Representatives of political parties, 100 influential individuals, 16 political parties and 11 moderators (coordinating the discussions) participated.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, if we look at the data in city of Harar from 9 districts in the region selected 50 people each, and more than 4,000 participants participated in the process Held in Harar City from June 5 to June 7, 2015, 9 community

groups. Accordingly, 324 representatives were selected from the community groups in the region to participate in the agenda-setting process.<sup>62</sup>

59 Key informant 5 dialogue facilitator Amhara region

60 Key informants 5

61 END 06/06/24 Participants in the consultation phase held in Addis Ababa city <https://ethiondc.org.et/%e1%89%a0%e1%8a%a0%e1%8b%b2%e1%88%b5-%e1%8a%a0%e1%89%a0%e1%89%a3-%e1%8a%a8%e1%89%b0%e1%88%9b-%e1%89%a0%e1%89%b0%e1%8a%ab%e1%88%84%e1%8b%b0%e1%8b%8d-%e1%8b%a8%e1%88%9d%e1%8a%ad%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%ad/>

62 END 12/30/2023 The commission successfully conducted a survey of participants in the Harari region <https://ethiondc.org.et/%e1%8a%ae%e1%88%9a%e1%88%bd%e1%8a%91-%e1%8b%a8%e1%88%90%e1%88%a8%e1%88%aa-%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%8d%e1%88%8d-%e1%8b%a8%e1%89%b0%e1%88%b3%e1%89%b3%e1%8d%8a%e1%8b%8e%e1%89%bd-%e1%88%8d%e1%8b%a8%e1%89%b3/>

At larger regions such as Oromia and Amhara also involved large number of participants. For example in Oromia region more than 7,000 community representatives from 356 districts of the region participated in the dialogue held in Adama December 11, 2017. The segments of society participating in the agenda-setting process include women, youth, the elderly, teachers, government employees, self-employed, internally displaced persons, those marginalized due to their culture and profession, business people, and community leaders.<sup>63</sup> The conflict areas were not represented because of the security concern in Amhara and Oromia region.<sup>64</sup> Similarly in Amhara region from 263 districts of the region 45,000 representatives were participated in the agenda setting dialogues<sup>65</sup>

Within the ENDC bottom up approach the women participation is around 27% and People with disabilities around 5%. 76.5% total participation from planned expectation of community participation.<sup>66</sup> Considering this, one can argue that the presence of many diverse participants contribute to a high level of inclusion. This measurement reflects only the presence or in-person attendance of people from different walks of life in the agenda-setting process. The high participation of individuals from various social groups, while keeping other factors constant, likely enhances the feeling of being recognized as members of the communities that these participants represent.

The number of diverse participants continued to grow as the commission focused on targeting specific groups, such as prisoners, and made unsuccessful attempts to involve armed groups as well. The quota system applied for women, for example, is an incredible institutional design aimed at enhancing inclusivity; however, it faced various challenges during implementation. For instance, it has proven difficult to recruit female participants according to the minimum quota plan outlined in the institutional design.<sup>67</sup>

While the institutional framework is beneficial, additional mechanisms should be introduced to encourage participation from non-mainstream sections of society in the dialogue. Strategies such as targeted mobilization and inclusion tools—including symbolic empowerment and direct outreach to potential participants—can increase the inclusivity of the dialogue. For example, recruiting more women as facilitators and for other roles within the dialogue institutions could be considered a form of symbolic empowerment. This approach would enhance the representation of diverse social groups, particularly working-class and marginalized community members.

63 ENDC 12/18/24 A consultation is underway to gather the agenda of the Woreda community groups in the Oromia region. <https://ethiondc.org.et/%e1%89%a0%e1%8a%a6%e1%88%ae%e1%88%9a%e1%8b%ab-%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%8d%e1%88%8d-%e1%8b%a8%e1%8b%88%e1%88%a8%e1%8b%3-%e1%8b%a8%e1%88%9b%e1%8a%85%e1%89%a0%e1%88%a8%e1%88%b0%e1%89%a5-%e1%8a%ad%e1%8d%8d/>

64 Key informant 5 facilitator in Amhara region

65 END <https://ethiondc.org.et/%e1%8b%a8%e1%88%85%e1%89%a5%e1%88%a8%e1%89%b0%e1%88%b0%e1%89%a5-%e1%8b%88%e1%8a%aa%e1%88%8e%e1%89%bd-%e1%88%9d%e1%8a%ad%e1%8a%ad%e1%88%ad-%e1%89%a0%e1%88%b5%e1%8a%ac%e1%89%b5-%e1%89%b0%e1%8c%a0/>

66 Presentation from ENDC representative at the July 7 consultative workshop

67 Key informant 5 facilitator Amhara region

The major challenge in this context the effort made to mobilize even armed groups and opposition political parties that boycotted the dialogue. Relentless effort has made to include these groups has not been successful.<sup>68</sup> The high participation which exceeds 200,000 compared to the self-exclusion of opposing political parties and armed group. This remains challenge the Commission must address.<sup>69</sup> Moreover there are still members of civil society who are raising concern on the exclusion of section of communities such as children and children with special needs.<sup>70</sup> Agenda gathering from Tigray has not been made possible and it will remain the major challenge to the Ethiopian national dialogue.

## 6.2. The Voice: Equality in Participation

Political dialogue in Ethiopia is often perceived as an elite preoccupation. As a result, the design of political dialogue platforms frequently excludes the masses. The modes of communication and cultural practices inherent in modern politics are tailored for the elite and appear elitist. This exclusive design likely fails to accommodate pluralistic voices, despite the large number of participants from diverse cleavages and social classes. For example, youth may not feel comfortable participating and presenting their views on a stage designed for elites.<sup>71</sup> The same is true for women; inviting them to fit into masculine platforms often limits their participation to a symbolic level. Hence the design that allows each cleavage to gather exclusively allowed high participating.

The design of the Ethiopian national dialogue appears progressive in its aim to open space for a diverse society. The commission is cognizant of the structural challenges. The organization of breakout sessions based on societal cleavages is an impressive institutional design that enhances inclusion and empowers various communities.<sup>72</sup> The introduced quota system has also contributed to the dialogue's inclusiveness.<sup>73</sup>

The facilitators who were trained introduced the dialogue session. Minute takers and chairs get elected. Each day starts with previous day minute agenda. The participant deliberates, correct modify and add before approval of the minutes. In case of the cleavages were large such as teachers for example the breakout session divided into two and

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68 Key informant 6 Commissioner

69 Key informant 5 2025 facilitator

70 Conversation during the validation workshop August 28 2025 and Follow up interview with expert on children education and the children with special needs Key informant 10

71 Key informant 3 2025 CSO youth

72 Key informant 3 2025 CSO youth

73 Key informant 4, 2025 CSO women's

the minute finally combined approved in larger session.<sup>74</sup>The commission also trained the participants and will continue to provide training to enhance quality of participation at the national plenary.<sup>75</sup>

The parallel sessions significantly enhanced the inclusiveness of the process, as they exclusively involved sections of society.<sup>76</sup> For example, women-only agenda-gathering platforms enriched the voices of women, and youth-only platforms increased youth representation. Despite these strengths, a lack of innovative practices ultimately limits the empowerment of diverse societal sections to participate fully.<sup>77</sup> Moreover in the plenary sessions there were concerns of being dominated by groups either on the ethnic or religious terms while at the same time the breakout session enhanced group-based agenda gathering. Those who were not satisfied at the plenary session also invited to submit their agenda using alternative mechanism such as e-participation.<sup>78</sup>

Participants mainly at the zonal and regional level fully participated despite they express doubt about the process. Despite security concerns after the agenda gathering dialogue, participant who came from various localities participated and voice out their agenda, debated and negotiated in the dialogue sessions mainly in the plenary.<sup>79</sup> There were voices from participant concerning conditionality to make the dialogue successfully. For example, some requested the involvement of armed groups, the freeing of political prisoners before the dialogue commence.<sup>80</sup>

However, within the main national dialogue platform, particularly in the agenda-gathering space, a large number of participants do not automatically translate to diversity in deliberation and voice.<sup>81</sup>For example while professional groups were asked to focus on their professional agenda but often they raise ethnic concerns instead.<sup>82</sup> Facilitators had to actively push and motivate participants to engage in the deliberative processes focusing on the expected agenda. Participant bring into the table various social, cultural, economic and governance issue relevant at the local level. This diverse voice has to be properly articulated mainly at the national plenary level. The NDC has mandated to set the final agenda gathered from above 200,000 participants. At national level 4000 participants are expected.<sup>83</sup> Hence the national plenary remains at stake to maintain the success.

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74 Key informant 5 facilitator Amhara region

75 Key informant 6 Commissioner ENDC

76 Key informant 3 CSO youth

77 Key informant 4 CSO women

78 Key informant 5 Facilitator in Amhara region

79 Key informant 5 facilitator in Amhara region

80 Key informant 5 facilitator in Amhara region

81 Key informant 3 2025 CSO youth

82 Key informant 5 2025 Facilitator Amhara region

83 Key informant 6 Commissioner

### 6.3. The Presence and the Voice: Equity

Ethiopia, like any society, is asymmetric and hierarchical. Implementing a national dialogue as a practice of deliberative democracy within such a structurally diverse community where access to power, capital, and knowledge is unevenly distributed **therefore** requires extra effort to enhance inclusivity. During the agenda-gathering stage, the national dialogue commission struggled to achieve its expected quotas for women and other marginalized community cleavages. Although the platform's design was officially open to all and encouraged women to participate, the pre-existing structural conditions made it difficult to mobilize **many** women as planned.<sup>84</sup> There was concern of financial issues as participants dissatisfied with the allowance and the financial budget allocated for each participants.<sup>85</sup>

In response, corrective measures were taken at the regional and federal levels through targeted interventions to increase women's participation in the agenda-gathering process.<sup>86</sup> There were times the commission covered for babysitters.<sup>87</sup> This is impressive learning curve made possible within the institutional design. However, the institutional design itself lacked other forms of targeted support to make participation genuinely feasible for all. Critical interventions were absent, such as financial stipends, accessibility measures, dedicated outreach programs, workplace leave provisions, free transport, childcare services, or the certification of participants as civic citizens—a credential that could have measurable economic or political value to incentivize involvement.

Moreover agenda setting is the mandate of the NDC. There much hegemonic discourse about the national at the expense of the local. In Ethiopia political landscape the local is as critical as regional or national level. A critical flaw is the operational tendency to prioritize issues deemed “national” in scope (e.g., constitutional reform, federalism), while filtering out or marginalizing hyper-local concerns (e.g., a specific land dispute, access to a local clinic, municipal corruption) as irrelevant to the high-level conversation. This creates a false dichotomy. Moreover the ways in which *hagerawi* is translated as national relevance or something relevant to the federal level is very problematic and creates tension between the local and national.

Operationally, facilitators and officials often explain *hagerawi* as relevance at higher level or upper level. This may encourage filtering of community-submitted issues, deeming many local concerns as not “nationally relevant.” This is creating an inherent critical

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84 Key informant 4 CSO youth

85 Key informant 5 Facilitator in Amhara region

86 Key informant 2 CSO women

87 Key informant 5 facilitator in Amhara region

paradox conceptually, legally and operationally: the process sought to build a national consensus from the ground up, yet in practice, it risked silencing the grounded, every-day experiences of conflict that citizens most urgently wanted to *voice*. This filtering directly undermined the *voice* dimension of inclusivity, threatening to make the entire exercise feel disconnected from the lived realities of the populace it was designed to serve. Excluding local agendas under the pretext that they are not “national” directly undermines the voice aspect of inclusivity. For citizens, these local issues are the tangible, daily manifestations of the very national political failures the dialogue aims to address. A land dispute may exemplify failed federal land policy; local ethnic tensions may reflect flawed national identity management; municipal corruption is a symptom of a broken governance contract.

Therefore, a genuinely inclusive process must recognize that local agendas have national relevance. They provide the empirical, grounded data that gives meaning to abstract political concepts. Dismissing them not only silences the voices of those who raised them but also robs the national dialogue of its essential connection to the lived reality of the people it claims to represent. The process must develop mechanisms, such as thematic aggregation and clear feedback loops, to demonstrate how local grievances collectively inform and define the national problems requiring resolution.

# 07 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This report evaluated the inclusivity of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission's (ENDC) agenda-gathering process against a multiple-pillar framework derived from deliberative democracy theory: conceptual and legal framework, institutional design, equity/parity, and equality in participation. The assessment measured both quantitative presence (representation) and qualitative voice (influence) of diverse societal groups. The Agenda-gathering process was an ambitious and logistically formidable undertaking that succeeded in convening a broad cross-section of Ethiopian society. Its institutional pragmatism and openness to civil society collaboration were notable strengths that fostered unprecedented levels of participation. The following points outline the principal issues underlying the assessment.

The Ethiopian National Dialogue process is conceived as a Hybrid Model launched from the top (state power) but was operationally designed to function from the bottom up. This creates an inherent tension. While the operational design successfully generated massive grassroots participation (bottom-up energy), its political authorship (top-down origin) fundamentally constrained its perceived legitimacy and its ability to integrate the most critical anti-establishment voices. This suggests that the genesis of a dialogue process is as critical as its design in determining its transformative potential.

The Agenda-gathering process demonstrates that inclusion is not a binary concept but a spectrum. The ENDC excelled at achieving quantitative *presence*, the physical representation of diverse social groups. However, it struggled to facilitate genuine qualitative *voice*—the effective agency and influence of those groups within the deliberation. This underscores a crucial conceptual point: inclusive design is a necessary but insufficient condition for transformative dialogue. Without deliberate strategies to equalize communication and power dynamics (e.g., targeted facilitation, addressing socio-economic barriers), *presence* can become merely symbolic, reinforcing existing hierarchies rather than disrupting them and be a transformative force.

The report empirically proves that a neutral, open-for-all application of deliberative principles in a deeply unequal society like Ethiopia will inevitably reproduce those same inequalities. The concept of procedural neutrality is a myth in an asymmetric context. Therefore, for a dialogue to be truly inclusive, it must actively employ mechanisms of “positive discrimination” or affirmative action (e.g., quotas, targeted funding, specialized

facilitation for marginalized groups). The absence of such equity-based measures or their inadequacy (stipends, childcare) was a primary failure, confirming that structural inequality cannot be solved by political dialogue alone; it must be actively counteracted within the dialogue's very design. The commission gradually enhanced its effort to address these structural barriers.

The Ethiopian national dialogue introduces the paradox of the Constrained Convener. The state, which is often a party to the previous and current conflicts, acts as the architect and funder of the dialogue meant to address grievances against it. This foundation is seen limiting the ENDC's ability to be perceived as a neutral arbiter and explains the widespread skepticism among opposition groups. This resulted in an ambivalent position for the political elite despite mass mobilization in the national dialogue. It suggests that for a state-led dialogue to gain legitimacy, it needs to cede significant operational and oversight control to broadly accepted non-state actors.

A significant conceptual finding is the emergence of a vibrant ecosystem of deliberation around the official national dialogue process. Civil society networks (e.g., Timret, Ubuntu) did not just participate in the state-sanctioned process; they created their own parallel, complementary deliberative spaces. This pluralization where multiple, overlapping dialogues occur, enhances overall inclusivity by capturing agendas that the official process might miss. The effectiveness of the overall national dialogue, therefore, depends less on the ENDC's monopoly over the process and more on its willingness to formally recognize and integrate these pluralized outputs into a cohesive whole.

## RECOMMENDATIONS: A PATHWAY TOWARDS TRANSFORMATIVE DIALOGUE

The following measures can help to address the identified gaps in inclusivity, legitimacy and enhance the transformative potential of the national dialogue process.

### Ethiopian Government & Legislature:

1. To resolve the fundamental “constrained convener” paradox, the government can distance itself from the operational management of the ENDC. This can be achieved by empowering the Commission’s Advisory Council and associate stakeholders with greater oversight authority over participant selection and agenda-setting for the national plenary.
2. Authorize Broader Engagement: Grant the ENDC an explicit and public mandate to engage in mediated, pre-negotiation talks with all armed groups to secure their participation in the dialogue, under mutually agreed-upon conditions. Beyond the *mikekker* and *weyeyet* the ENDC may also be granted the mandate to organize *derider* or negotiations between the incumbent and armed groups as well as opposition parties. Relentlessly keep trying for peace talks that complement the ND and table the ND on the peace negotiation tables

### Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC):

1. **Institutionalize Equity:** It is important to implement the prescribed equity measures. Creating a transparent funding mechanism to disburse participant support could ensure that poverty is not a barrier to engagement.
2. **Adopt Transformative Facilitation:** Remaining national dialogue process should move beyond traditional moderation approaches. Train facilitators in techniques specifically designed to empower marginalized voices (e.g., using oral traditions, multilingual small groups, culturally specific dialogue circles) to ensure that presence translates into influential voice.
3. **Formally Integrate Parallel Agendas:** Publicly recognize and incorporate the agendas generated by civil society networks (e.g., Timret, Ubuntu) into the core working documents of the national plenary. Issue an official response to these submissions to demonstrate that they have been heard and valued.
4. **Launch a Transparency Portal:** Proactively publish all non-sensitive data—including finalized agendas, participant demographics, and session summaries—on a public portal to build trust through radical transparency. Pragmatically use the conceptual

depth and the board and open legal mandate towards enhancing inclusion and empowering community, attracting the elite and pluralizing the national dialogue aspiration and operation

5. **Introduce objectives beyond consensus or provide pluralistic interpretation of what *Hagerawi Megbabat* informs:** The ENDC should publicly reframe the objective of the dialogue. The goal should not be to achieve unanimous agreement on all issues (consensus), which is often impossible in a fractured society, but to establish a meta-consensus. Interpret the legal and political concept of *Hagerawi Megbabat* not as a single, unified consensus, but as a ‘working agreement or a framework for peaceful coexistence that encompass. The final report of the national dialogue should clearly distinguish between areas where consensus was found and areas where a meta-consensus—an agreement to disagree legitimately and peacefully—was the best achievable outcome. This honesty will build greater long-term credibility than a forced or superficial consensus profound disagreement on certain issues.
6. **Consider the Local as National:** To ensure genuine inclusivity, the ENDC must mandate the inclusion of all local agendas without filtering them for perceived “national relevance,” as these hyper-local issues are often the tangible manifestations of national failures. The logic of the bottom-up approach is not to take the upper-level issue merely to the bottom but to uplift the local and excluded subjects and issues into the national table for *Hagerawi Megbabat*.
7. **A clear and transparent methodology:** Publicly share a clear and transparent methodology that can help to synthesize these community-level grievances into broader national thematic areas, demonstrating how specific concerns form the foundational evidence for macro-level discussions. Establishing a direct feedback loop to report back to communities on how their input was aggregated and utilized, thereby validating their participation and strengthening the overall legitimacy and credibility of the process is also of great importance.

### **Civil Society & Associate Partners:**

1. **Form a Unified Advocacy Coalition:** Consolidate the efforts of various networks (women, youth, media, etc.) into a powerful coalition to advocate collectively for the implementation of these recommendations, maintaining pressure for a truly inclusive process.
2. **Continue Parallel Deliberation:** Continue to host independent, community-level dialogue sessions to ensure that agendas from the most marginalized communities are documented and available to counterbalance any elite capture of the official process. Conduct

3. **Independent Monitoring:** Continue publishing periodic “inclusivity audit” reports that monitor the ENDC’s progress against the metrics of presence and voice, serving as an independent accountability mechanism.

### **Opposition Groups:**

1. **Leverage Parallel Processes:** Document and publicize agendas through civil society networks to ensure issues are recorded and addressed by the official process.
2. **Strategic Engagement:** Participate in the process with a well-trained representatives to effectively advocate your positions and hold the process accountable
3. **Set only feasible demands, strengthen bargaining power and prevent being sidelined by building common understanding and cohesion with other groups**

### **International Partners:**

1. **Fund Inclusivity Directly:** Channel financial and technical support specifically to the equity measures rather than solely to general government or ENDC budgets.
2. **Provide Expert Facilitation Support:** Offer resources for the training of facilitators in transformative dialogue techniques and for providing expert mediators to assist in negotiations with excluded armed groups.

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