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**A SUMMARY REPORT OF
ETHIOPIA'S NATIONAL
DIALOGUE OBSERVATION SERIES:
AN ANALYSIS ON INCLUSIVITY,
PARTICIPATION & TRANSPARENCY**



CARD
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CENTER FOR ADVANCEMENT OF
RIGHTS AND DEMOCRACY



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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

This report presents a summary of CARD's previous three assessment reports on the Ethiopian National Dialogue Process, an initiative launched in 2021 to address the country's deep-seated political crisis. This synthesis report appraises the national dialogue's process, starting from the establishment of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) to the design of the process as well as progresses in the lead up to the national dialogue plenary against the core principles of inclusivity, participation and transparency.

Consequently, the series of observation reports reveal that the Ethiopia's national dialogue process has introduced significant legal, institutional, and procedural innovations, broadening participation and delivering measurable gains in inclusivity. However, it has also encountered a central paradox: the state serving both as a primary party to the conflicts (as the architect, funder), and arbiter of the dialogue—responsible for addressing grievances directed against itself.

At the moment of writing this report, the challenges faced by the national dialogue process, such as; inclusion of some opposition parties and armed groups; limitations observed in diaspora engagement; the difficulty surrounding the organization of national plenary; and agenda gathering in *Tigray* region, have not only affected the pace and timely conclusion of the process but also put the dialogue at the crossroad. Moreover, the persistence of active armed conflicts further undermines the environment necessary for success of the process.

This summary report concludes that for the national dialogue to be transformative-as reflected in its innovative legal, conceptual and pragmatic institutional praxis so far-a fundamental reset is required in organizing the final stage of the national dialogue. In the remaining process the ENDC needs to think of greater involvement of pluralized oversight bodies, particularly CSOs, as it supports in the selection and prioritization of agenda, securing the inclusion of all conflict parties through pre-negotiation, and above all enhance transparency and equity measures.

KEY FINDINGS

- The creation of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) via Proclamation No. 1265/2021 represented a state-sanctioned effort to facilitate an inclusive and transparent national dialogue to pave the way for national consensus and to maintain the integrity of the country amidst ongoing violent conflicts and political polarization in the country.
- The ENDC is entrusted with several key responsibilities aimed at fostering national unity and reconciliation. To carry out these key responsibilities effectively, the ENDC is organized to facilitate dialogue with six key structures. These components are council of commissioners, chief commissioner, deputy commissioner, secretariat, committees, and necessary staffs. While the ENDC's mandate is grounded in principles of inclusivity and transparency, its implementation continue to face significant structural and practical challenges.
- The Ethiopian national dialogue introduced two key concepts: *mikekker* and *weyeyet*, which together open a broad conceptual canvas and a form of comprehensive framework that can be usable for both political dialogues and social conversations inclusive of mourning and actively listening to the grievances of fellow citizens.

- The agenda gathering stage of the national dialogue processes portrays an impressive achievement in reaching out to the people at grassroots level in wider part of the country.
- The design of the national dialogue process employed a bottom-up approach, progressing from local communities or *woreda* (districts) level consultations to regional states and ultimately culminating in a national plenary. It resembles a pyramid structure, where communities identify and deliberate on potential list of agenda, select representatives, and convene at regional and finally national level. A top down by birth, national dialogue became a bottom up by implementation giving it a hybrid model of ND.
- Non-inclusion of major armed and political opposition groups hampered the national dialogue process, raising critical questions about its legitimacy and comprehensiveness. Mechanisms for participant selection have also been frequently mentioned as factors that risk allowing dominant political forces to steer the agenda.
- Limitations in transparency are evident in the manner of public communication, language barriers, and insufficient accessibility of information, all of which can affect public trust and oversight.
- The dialogue process operates within a complex context characterized by deep-seated mistrust, a historical winner-takes-all political culture and competing national narratives. These factors, compounded by ongoing

violence, present substantial obstacles to fostering genuine dialogue and achieving durable agreements as well as insuring inclusive participation and transparent process.

- Some opposition parties, key belligerents including Amara Fano militants, the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA), and other small militant groups in the country remain outside the process actively engaging in insurgency movements. Their absence nullifies the dialogue's claim to address root causes of violence.
- While all diaspora communities were invited to participate in the national dialogue process some dominant diaspora communities in North America and Europe abstained from engagement in the dialogue, as ENDC mainly used official diplomatic channels, with which they are at odds, for direct-face-to face consultation and agenda collection.
- Reframing the purpose of the second round consultations into awareness creation and mobilization of support for national dialogue process helped ENDC to address its key challenges, such as misinformation, political polarization and low trust among key actors. Due to persistent political mistrust, security constraints, and logistical difficulties the Commission was not able to achieve these objectives.
- The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission embodies the "Constrained Convener" paradox: though mandated by parliament and funded by the state—a principal conflict party—it is tasked with mediating the country's deepest disputes.

01

INTRODUCTION: DIALOGUE IN A FRACTURED STATE

Ethiopia stands at a critical juncture following decades of authoritarian rule, ethnic federalism tensions, and a devastating civil war in the north part of the country (2020-2022). The nation grapples with profound disagreements over the nature of the state, history, identity, power-sharing, and justice historically. The Ethiopian national dialogue process is a response to these symptoms of political crisis and urgent need for reconciliation and a sustainable framework for governance amidst escalating violence and political instability. The country experienced significant political upheaval leading several institutions and individuals to call for an all-inclusive national dialogue process.

In this context, the establishment of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) via Proclamation No. 1265/2021 represented a state-sanctioned effort to facilitate a structured, inclusive national dialogue. The proclamation acknowledges the existence of profound disagreements among political elites and society, framing the dialogue as a means 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.”¹ The Commission was formally established in December 2021 to pave the way for national consensus and to maintain the integrity of the country amidst ongoing violent conflicts and political polarization

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

in the country.² In February 2022, the federal law making house, the House of Peoples Representatives appointed 11 commissioners to the ENDC, marking a significant step in operationalizing the Commission. The selection process, however, has faced criticism regarding its transparency and inclusiveness.³ Although the proclamation aimed to create a diverse and representative commission, concerns were raised about the criteria for nomination, which appeared to favor elite candidates with academic backgrounds, potentially sidelining community leaders, women, and youth. This lack of transparency in the selection process could undermine the credibility of the Commission and the national dialogue it seeks to facilitate.

The ENDC is entrusted with several key responsibilities aimed at fostering national unity and reconciliation, which include, *inter alia*, facilitating inclusive consultations; identifying root causes of conflict; implementing the national dialogue, process; building a culture of consensus; and communicating outcomes. To carry out these key responsibilities effectively, the ENDC is structured to facilitate effective governance and operational efficiency of the process, comprising six key components. These components are council of commissioners, chief commissioner, deputy commissioner, secretariat, committees⁴, and necessary staffs.⁵

2 Heinrich Boll Stiftung, "Ethiopia's National Dialogue: Issues and Potential Scenarios", 2024, p.18.

3 Gemechu, Y., 'Ethiopia's new 'national dialogue' cannot deliver inclusive peace', 2022. <http://aljazeera.com/opinion/2022/1/27/can-ethiopias-national-dialogue-deliver-inclusive-peace>.

4 Established as necessary, these committees address specific issues or area of concern within the dialogue process, allowing for focused discussion and recommendations.

5 A team of professionals who supports the Commission's work including researchers, facilitators and administrative staff.

According to the proclamation, a facilitator who guides formal discussions and deliberations are called *awayay*. 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*).⁶ 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 goal includes sympathy and condolences (*masetesazen*).⁷ The proclamation hence recognizes discussions and dialogues occurring at regional and federal level under the auspicious of the commission as *Hagerawi Mikekker*.

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 usable for both political dialogues and social conversations inclusive of mourning and actively listening to the grievances of fellow citizens. 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.

6 Desta Täklä Wäld. Addis Yä Amar ñña Máz gäbä Qalat. Addis Ababa: Artistic Printers, 1970, p. 429.

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

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 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”. Using this conceptual and theoretical devices the Ethiopian national dialogue agenda gathering process is evaluated for its inclusive praxis using this conceptual and theoretical devices.

National dialogues are typically employed as contingency mechanisms during acute political crises or post-war transitions. Their success hinges on core principles: inclusivity of all stakeholders, transparency of process, independence of the convener, and a conducive environment, ideally featuring a cessation of hostilities. This paper analyzes the Ethiopian process through this normative lens, synthesizing evidence from its preparatory, agenda-gathering, and consultation phases. It argues that despite a sophisticated legal and conceptual framework, the END has been fundamentally hampered by a legitimacy crisis originating from its inception, limiting its potential to achieve a transformative, sustainable peace.

This study employed a qualitative research approach, primarily utilizing key informant interviews, document analysis, and secondary data review to assess the progress, challenges, and opportunities of Ethiopia's National Dialogue Process. The methodology was designed to capture in-depth insights from experts, stakeholders, and official sources involved in the dialogue process.

Data were collected through multiple complementary methods in three phases at the preparatory, agenda gathering and consultations stages. Semi-structured key informant interviews (KII) were conducted with experts in the three phases. The interviews followed the Key Informant Interview Guide, covering themes such as second-round consultations, diaspora engagement, Tigray agenda collection, inclusivity, and challenges in the dialogue process. These interviews allowed participants to provide detailed explanations, subjective experiences, and expert opinions, which complemented insights drawn from documents and secondary sources.

Document and literature review formed another key component of data collection. The ENDC consultations with various segments of society such as professional associations, political parties, as well as press releases, and reports were analyzed to understand the formal structures, processes, and progress of the dialogue. Secondary sources, including news articles, policy briefs, and analytical reports from organizations, such as the Institute for Security Studies (ISS), International Crisis Group (ICG), Berghof Foundation, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and academic publications were reviewed to triangulate interview findings and validate information from multiple perspectives.

The study has used multiple methods of data analysis including:

- Legal and Policy Review: Close reading of Proclamation No. 1265/2021, ENDC procedural guidelines, and official reports.
- Conceptual Interpretation: Tracing the etymology and political usage of key Amharic terms—such as *Hagerawi Megbabat*, *Mikekker*, and *Weyeyet*—to understand their meanings and potential for mobilizing inclusive, transformational politics.
- Theoretical Application: Continuously contextualizing empirical findings within deliberative democracy theory.
- Political ethnography closely observing the dialogue process at different stages.

Data was analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis. Interview transcripts, field notes, and documents were coded 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. Three different reports were produced first and each also presented to the public as an exercise of validation. Comments were incorporated and the synthesis report is produced out of the tree reports. The synthesis report was presented at a validation workshop involving reviewers, ENDC representatives, civil society, scholars, and stakeholders. Their comments were incorporated into this final version.

02

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: APPRAISING INCLUSIVITY AND TRANSPARENCY

Inclusivity and transparency in national dialogue process are essential for creating a democratic and participatory process that truly reflects the diverse needs of society. Inclusivity means actively engaging all relevant stakeholders, including political parties, civil society organizations, marginalized groups, private sector and grassroots communities. This broad participation is vital to ensure that every voice is heard, especially those historically sidelined in political discussions. By welcoming diverse perspectives, national dialogues can gain legitimacy and effectiveness, capturing the complexities of the societal landscape. Moreover, inclusivity helps identify common ground, allowing stakeholders to collaboratively tackle underlying issues and work towards sustainable solutions that benefit everyone.

Inclusiveness in national dialogue is a core principle that enhances both the legitimacy and effectiveness of the dialogue process. It encompasses political, social, and geographical aspects. Political inclusiveness refers to the active participation of a wide array of political parties, movements, and interest groups in the dialogue process. This dimension is critical for ensuring that all political perspectives are represented, which fosters a sense of ownership among stakeholders and enhances the legitimacy of the dialogue. By ensuring that diverse voices are heard and considered, national dialogues can effectively address underlying issues and foster a sense of ownership among participants, inclusivity is essential for building trust, mitigating conflict, and promoting social cohesion in societies facing political or social challenges.

Social inclusiveness particularly focuses on engaging marginalized and underrepresented groups, including women, youth, ethnic minorities, persons with disabilities, and other underrepresented communities. Actively involving diverse social perspectives allows national dialogues to address the root causes of conflict and fosters a sense of belonging among all citizens. By prioritizing social inclusiveness, national dialogues can help dismantle systemic inequalities and promote a more just and harmonious society.

Geographical inclusiveness ensures that all regions are represented in the dialogue, addressing regional disparities and grievances. This dimension mitigates feelings of alienation among marginalized areas and enhances national unity. By incorporating perspectives from various geographical regions, national dialogues can create a more balanced and comprehensive understanding of the issues at hand. This inclusivity is vital for fostering a sense of national identity that reflects the diversity of the population. When all regions have a voice in the dialogue, it not only strengthens national cohesion but also empowers local communities to engage in the political process, ultimately leading to more effective governance and conflict prevention.

Similarly, transparency is one of the primary success factors for a national dialogue process, which entails that decision-making processes within national dialogue processes should be transparent, inclusive, and accountable. Transparency enhances trust among participants and ensures that the outcomes reflect the interests and concerns of all stakeholders. Transparency in national dialogue processes requires that basic principles of participation are clear and the same for everyone so that no single party dictates the agenda of the dialogues.

In practical terms, transparency means having a dedicated website, and social media accounts as well as other platforms such as the mainstream media to publicize the process, decisions, and challenges to the national dialogue. Hence, the public has enough information to decide on agenda items as well as deciding whether to participate in the dialogue process. Transparency is, therefore, an important element to ensure accountability, ownership, and participation. Furthermore, transparency and public participation are key in the assessment of the effectiveness of any national dialogue. Without transparency, such processes may lose its legitimacy.

This analysis employs a multi-pillar framework grounded in deliberative democracy, involving both inclusivity and transparency, to assess the dialogue process. We evaluate inclusivity not merely as quantitative presence (who is at the table) but as qualitative voice (who influences the agenda and outcomes). Legitimacy is assessed both procedurally (fairness of rules) and socially (acceptance by key stakeholders). The interaction between these factors determines the overall credibility and potential impact of the process.

Within the expanding literature on national dialogues, inclusivity is a foundational concept. Deliberative democracy provides a valuable normative framework for understanding inclusive political processes, particularly in conflict transformation and establishing new political orders (See report two).⁸

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>.

Deliberative democracy has sparked extensive debate in Western political theory and finds distinct interpretations elsewhere, such as in the discourse on “socialist deliberative democracy with Chinese characteristics.” For this analysis, a summary suffices. Proponents argue that deliberative democracy fosters inclusivity while mitigating elitism.⁹ It transcends purely procedural models by incorporating dispositional elements, recognizing participants as social and political beings rather than merely private, rational actors. Its aspiration is not solely consensus but pluralistic outcomes through voting, negotiation, and other engagements. Crucially, it embraces pluralism by striving for *metaconsensus*—a mutual recognition of the legitimacy of differing values, preferences, and discourses. This addresses critiques from agonistic democratic theories that challenge an overemphasis on rational consensus.¹⁰

The Chinese model emphasizes the leadership of the Communist Party, integrating multiparty cooperation and political consultation under democratic centralism. It combines electoral elements within a single-party framework with innovative grassroots deliberation, aiming for stability and standardized governance.¹¹

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.

10 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.

11 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.

Both the Western liberal model (prioritizing pluralism and contestation) and the Chinese consultative model (emphasizing stability and top-down consensus) are centered on deliberation and inclusive participation. In the Ethiopian context—marked by a strong state tradition alongside vibrant oppositional and social critique—both traditions offer relevant conceptual tools for analyzing the National Dialogue.

Deliberative democratic theory offers a commendable framework for Ethiopia's ND, but its success hinges on transcending formal inclusion to address deep-seated structural inequalities. Historically, groups such as women, peasants, workers, and ethnic communities have been excluded from meaningful political participation. 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, non-traditional spaces. The critical question is whether the process will legitimize existing power structures or actively disrupt them. This distinction depends on the ND's willingness to institutionalize substantive democratic reforms rather than settle for symbolic representation. Without practical mechanisms that surface plural voices, even a well-intentioned dialogue may reinforce exclusion.

Thus, the challenge lies in reimagining deliberative democracy not as a mere procedural exercise, but as a mechanism for structural transformation. The goal must be to ensure that Ethiopia's marginalized majority are not merely heard but become decisive actors in shaping the political future. Only then can the National Dialogue become a transformative, rather than reproductive, democratic experiment.

03

INSTITUTIONAL DESIGN

Institutional design of ND or any other deliberative democracy experiment considering inclusion and participation appear very critical and relevant. This assumption emphasizes how deliberative democracy can be made inclusive through structured systems and institutional design.¹² 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.¹³ The issues of financing of inclusion and participation for example also can be seen from this angle. In this vein in addition to institutional design, two approaches are relevant. These are equity and participation.

The equity or parity model focuses on the structural inequalities that limit participation.¹⁴ 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,

12 Pogrebinschi, Thamy. 2016. "Comparing Deliberative Systems: An Assessment of 12 Countries in Latin America."

13 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>.

14 See CARD's Assessment Report II.

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.

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. Centering on institutional design and its operation under ENDC this report documents the evolution considering inclusivity and transparency. Before this a preliminary assessment of the national dialogue is summarized here.

3.1. The Ethiopia national dialogue and its context: a primary assessment

In a published report by CARD 2024, the evaluation takes seriously the context and the emerging national dialogue. As per this first stage assessment, we indicated that the challenging emanating from the context was very critical. This analysis examines the Ethiopian National Dialogue Process, a state-led initiative through the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission (ENDC) to address profound political instability and ethnic conflict. The dialogue aims to build national consensus, restore state legitimacy, and establish a sustainable framework for

inclusive governance. While the ENDC's mandate is grounded in principles of inclusivity and transparency, its implementation faces significant structural and practical challenges.

Key findings indicate that the process is hampered by the exclusion of major armed and political opposition groups, raising critical questions about its legitimacy and comprehensiveness. Furthermore, mechanisms for participant selection risk allowing dominant political forces to steer the agenda. Transparency deficits are evident in limited public communication, language barriers, and insufficient accessibility of information, which weaken public trust and oversight.

The dialogue operates within a complex context characterized by deep-seated mistrust, a historical “winner-takes-all” political culture and competing national narratives. These factors, compounded by ongoing violence, present substantial obstacles to fostering genuine dialogue and achieving durable agreements. Even if consensus is reached, there is a persistent risk that outcomes may be co-opted by political elites rather than translated into meaningful structural reform.

The analysis concludes that for the Ethiopian National Dialogue to succeed as a credible instrument for peace and democratic renewal, it must urgently address its critical gaps in inclusion and transparency. Overcoming these operational shortcomings, alongside the deeper historical and political divisions, remains essential for the process to achieve its stated goals of reconciliation and sustainable governance.

However, the second after the agenda gathering stage unfold the ND processes depict an impressive achievement and milestone mainly in reaching out the masses in wider part of the country. To make sense of this a deep dive into the legal and pragmatic institutional design and operation is needed.

3.2. Institutional Design of the Ethiopian National Dialogue: A Hybrid Model

The institutional and procedural design of the national dialogue must fit the conceptual and legal framework and serve its vision and objectives. The major objective of the Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission is to identify the root causes and topics of disagreement on fundamental national issues through consultation and discussion (*weyeyet*) and prepare them for the *mikekker* (national decision-making forum). 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.

Hence, the objective presupposes the major challenges the country is facing and aspires to solve them. The scope combines the political which gravitates around state power and the social, concerning everyday relationships within society. Theoretically, one can locate the Ethiopian national dialogue within the broader theory of conflict transformation, as most of its conceptual apparatus is constructed from this theoretical perspective. However, it also falls within social contract theory, given that its aspirations include redefining state-society relations toward

constructing a new legitimate and credible state. To transform existing conflicts and allow for negotiation toward a new dispensation between state and society in a new political system, the inclusion of all actors and stakeholders is indispensable.

Toward achieving these objectives, ENDC has developed 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 basis for evaluating its implications for inclusivity and transparency, particularly in the agenda-gathering process.

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 agendas generated from public discussions. The national plenary is dedicated to deliberating on the organized and filtered agendas. All discussions at the local level in each regional state and the national plenary together inform the *Hagerawi Mikekker* (National Deliberative Forum). Hence, the triple-stage template involving preparatory, dialogue, and implementation phases in the global discourse on national dialogue is difficult to apply here. There is a tendency to stretch the Ethiopian National Dialogue (END) to fit this template as preparation, dialogue, and implementation stages. The dialogue has already started, given that the first discussions about agendas at the local level are considered part of the national dialogue. Therefore, the national plenary alone does not constitute the national dialogue, although it is its ultimate center.

The national dialogue and all activities of the commission revolve around the agenda, which is to be identified through a series of consultations and discussions. One of the principles of the national dialogue concerns the depth and relevance of agenda items. One of the duties of the

commission is crafting the 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.

The Ethiopian National Dialogue Commission emerged from the center of state power. As an entity designed to mediate both vertical and horizontal conflicts, its establishment was somewhat unconventional. It did not involve an international third party, nor did it incorporate indigenous mediation traditions through local elders. Instead, it was formed by the principal actors of the conflict, primarily the government, predominantly represented by the House of Peoples' Representatives, which has largely been dominated by the ruling party. This has been a major point of critique of the Ethiopian national dialogue. Its creation has led to perceptions of it as a non-credible agent to facilitate the national dialogue. However, a close reading of the institutional design of the national dialogue opens 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. 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-up approach is crafted given the deep-rooted nature of the conflicts in Ethiopia, as articulated in the proclamation. The problem itself justifies the need for the bottom-up approach and the creation of space for the masses. 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.

The process began at the lowest tier of locally organized space, the *woreda*, to select participants and gather agendas. At this *woreda* level, the commission aimed to include participants from various segments of society, such as *Idirs*, occupational groups, teachers, community leaders and elders, parents, youth, women, civil servants, and the business community, among others. There is also one undefined “room” where the local community can add participants as per their local and social context. The 8-10 thematic rooms for each social cleavage enabled diverse community members to participate in the dialogue process and fostered ownership for each section of Ethiopian society. During this process, 1,231 *woredas* were covered out of 1,333.

From the *woreda* to the zonal level and then to the regional level, the same approach was applied. Minutes were recorded and documented appropriately. Thousands of people took part in this process. The design seems «one-size-fits-all,» but it also opened additional space for tailoring the design to each local context. For example, displaced members of communities were also given space. This mode of participant selection is applied at both federal and city-level administrations. At the federal level, for instance, councils and federations of various civil societies were considered, primarily focusing on women’s civil society. This includes associations such as teachers’ organizations, federations of university teachers, groups representing people with disabilities, and

elders' associations. Additionally, there are networks of women for dialogue and various civil societies operating at the federal level, including the federal government, the House of Peoples' 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. The commission was designed 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. 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 a political space where communities learn about and recognize each other's concerns and own the political process. This is unprecedented in Ethiopia's typically top-down political trend. However, critics still see the vulnerability of the bottom-up approach to top-down manipulation.

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 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 selected 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 at all levels; as per the proclamation, such minutes will be submitted to the House of Peoples' Representatives and the Ethiopian Archives and Library Service for preservation (Proclamation, Article 30).

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

Generally, these three interventions can enhance the inclusion of all marginalized sections of society in political spaces, deliberation, 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.

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: hybrid	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

04

CONCEPTUAL STRENGTHS, STRUCTURAL FLAWS, AND THE PERSISTENCE OF EXCLUSION

4.1. A Dual Framework for Dialogue: Cultural Rootedness with a Bottom-Up Process

The ENDC's framework demonstrates notable strengths. Legally, it is grounded in a broad mandate and flexible operational principles. The governing proclamation defines the national dialogue using the culturally resonant Amharic concepts of *Hagerawi Mikekker* (forward-looking national consultation) and *Weyeyet* (retrospective healing and deep deliberation). This establishes a versatile dual framework, aimed at both solving future problems and addressing past grievances.

This conceptual depth is matched by operational design. The commission adopted a hybrid bottom-up approach, conducting consultations from the *woreda* (district) level upward and forging partnerships with associate stakeholders like religious councils and civil society networks (e.g., Timret, Ubuntu). This structure facilitated the mobilization of thousands of participants and helped surface core national issues, including constitutional reform, federalism, justice, reconciliation, and economic inequality. This approach ensures mass participation, making the process both conceptually and procedurally inclusive.

Moreover, the proclamation's inherent flexibility is a key asset. By articulating core principles such as inclusivity, transparency, impartiality, and credibility while allowing the ENDC to determine its own procedures and adopt additional principles as needed, the framework enables adaptive management of the complex dialogue process.

4.2. The Core Paradox: The Constrained Convener

The most critical finding is the identification of the “Constrained Convener” paradox. The ENDC was created by a proclamation enacted by the House of Peoples' Representatives (HoPR), an institution dominated by the incumbent ruling party. Consequently, the state, a primary conflict party, established and funds the body intended to arbitrate disputes in which it is implicated. This structural contradiction has:

- **Eroded Perceived Neutrality:** Cast a shadow over the ENDC's independence from the start, regardless of its operational efforts.
- **Fueled Skepticism and Boycotts:** Led major opposition parties and armed groups to question the dialogue's credibility and, in many cases, withdraw or refuse to participate.
- **Created Elite Ambivalence:** Resulted in an environment where political elites are either excluded or engaged with deep mistrust, even amidst mass public mobilization.

05

CRITICAL GAPS IN INCLUSIVITY & PARTICIPATION

The convener paradox manifests in severe inclusivity gaps:

- **Exclusion of Armed Actors:** Key belligerents, including the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) Amara Fano militants, other small militant groups in the country, remain outside the process, actively engaged in insurgency. Their absence nullifies the dialogue's claim to address root causes of violence.
- **The Tigray Quandary:** The region of Tigray, central to the recent civil war, has not begun formal consultations. Currently, ENDC is facing a deadlock in its moves to advance consultations in the Tigray region due to unresolved issues between the federal government and regional actors. Tigray Interim Regional Administration has set a number of preconditions to participate in the national dialogue most of which are beyond the mandate of ENDC. The preconditions include full implementation of the Pretoria Agreement, restoration of constitutional order, withdrawal of forces and civilian protection, safe return of internally displaced persons, restoration of the legal status of TPLF, addressing historical injustices, such as addressing war crimes.

- The commission claims that these preconditions are beyond its capacity. If the deadlock persists, the commissioners explained that alternative options are put in place, including phased consultations, indirect agenda submissions through trusted intermediaries, or reserving agenda space for later inclusion during the national plenary. The absence of Tigray region from the dialogue process—stemming from security concerns, political sensitivities, and a trust deficit—represents a critical gap in the dialogue’s representativeness and inclusivity (See CARD’s Assessment Report III).
- **Lack of Transparency in Agenda Selection for National Plenary:** As part of its commitment to the principle of transparency, the ENDC has set up a website and established a presence on social media platforms where it shares information about the national dialogue including the design and processes of agenda collection and selecting participants, second round consultations, diaspora engagement and progress updates. However, after agenda collection process has been completed in the two city administrations, all regions except Tigray, and diaspora communities, there is lack of transparency as to how agenda items for the national plenary have been selected and arranged.
- **Limited Diaspora Engagement:** Even if all diaspora communities were invited to participate in the national dialogue process, some dominant diaspora

communities in North America and Europe abstained from engagement as ENDC mainly used official diplomatic channels for direct-face-to face consultation and agenda collection. Moreover, agenda gathering process from the Ethiopian diaspora communities has faced challenges due to political polarization, fragmented representation, transparency concerns, and trust deficits. Despite these challenges, diaspora participation has broadened the inclusivity of the national dialogue process.

- **Redesigning the Second Round Consultation:** Initially, it was designed to collect agenda items primarily from a few *Woredas* in Amhara region that were not included during the first round agenda collection due to mistrust and security reasons as well as Tigray region. These consultations also aimed at convincing and engaging others segments of society such as armed groups, opposition parties, and prisoners or convicts. Unable to achieve the intended objectives, due to persistent political mistrust, security constraints, and logistical difficulties, the purpose of the second round consultations was reframed to serve other purposes. Accordingly, it was redesigned to create awareness and mobilize support for national dialogue process, and help ENDC to address its key challenges such as misinformation, political polarization and low trust among key actors. The consultations were conducted with major actors such

as professional associations, and civic and religious institutions (in Addis Ababa) and women, youth, person with disabilities (in all regions except Tigray).

- **Qualitative Voice vs. Quantitative Presence:** While quota systems improved the presence of women, youth, and marginalized groups, the translation of presence into influential voice was hampered by elite-dominated communication and a lack of transformative facilitation. Furthermore, structural barriers (lack of stipends, childcare) limited the participation of the most impoverished.
- **Pluralization Without Integration:** A vibrant ecosystem of parallel deliberation emerged via civil society networks, capturing agendas the official process might miss. However, the lack of formal mechanisms to integrate these outputs risks marginalizing these critical perspectives.

5.1. The Hostile Operating Environment

The dialogue has advanced amidst ongoing armed conflicts in Oromia, Amhara, and a fragile post-war situation in Tigray. This violates the principle of a cessation of hostilities, polarizes the political space, limits physical access for consultations, and makes the prospect of meaningful participation by conflict actors remote.

06

DISCUSSION: BRIDGING THE LEGITIMACY GAP

The Ethiopian case illustrates that a technically sound process is insufficient without political legitimacy. The “constrained convener” dilemma must be actively resolved for the dialogue to gain social acceptance. This requires a shift from state-controlled management to a pluralized oversight model. Furthermore, inclusivity cannot be passive; it requires proactive, equity-based interventions and direct outreach to excluded parties through trusted mediators.

The conceptual goal of *Hagerawi Megbabat* must also be pragmatically reframed. In a fractured society, seeking unanimous consensus on all issues may be impossible and could lead to forced, superficial agreements. A more credible goal may be “metaconsensus”—a framework agreement that acknowledges legitimate disagreement on certain issues while establishing protocols for peaceful coexistence and continued dialogue.

6.1. Recommendations: A Pathway to a Credible Process

To salvage the dialogue’s transformative potential, the following bold actions are recommended:

For the Ethiopian Government:

- 1. Cede Operational Control:** Pluralize oversight of the national plenary by empowering the ENDC's Advisory Council, supporting staff and associate stakeholders with genuine authority over agenda-setting and participant selection.
- 2. Authorize and Pursue Pre-Negotiations:** Publicly mandate the ENDC or an independent mediation body to engage in talks with all armed groups and Tigray region to secure their participation under mutually agreed conditions. Complement the dialogue with parallel peace talks.

For the ENDC:

- 1. Implement Radical Transparency:** Launch a public portal publishing agendas, participant data, and session summaries.
- 2. Institutionalize Equity Measures:** Establish a transparent fund to provide stipends, transport, and childcare, removing socio-economic barriers to participation.
- 3. Formally Integrate Parallel Agendas:** Publicly recognize and incorporate findings from civil society-led dialogues into the core plenary agenda.
- 4. Adopt Transformative Facilitation:** Train facilitators to empower grassroots voices and ensure qualitative influence.

- 5. Combining Conceptual Depth and Legal Mandate:**
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
- 6. Conceptual Clarification and Reframing Objectives:**
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 metaconsensus. 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. . 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 consensuses profound disagreement on certain issues.
- 7. 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*. A clear and transparent methodology

must be publicly shared to synthesize these community-level grievances into broader national thematic areas, demonstrating how specific concerns form the foundational evidence for macro-level discussions. Finally, it is critical to establish 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

For Civil Society & International Partners:

- 1. Form a Unified Advocacy Coalition:** To pressure for implementation of inclusivity and transparency measures.
- 2. Continue Parallel Monitoring and Deliberation:** Act as independent accountability mechanisms and create safe spaces for marginalized voices.
- 3. Provide Targeted Support:** Fund equity measures and facilitation expertise directly, rather than only through general budget support.

07

CONCLUSION: NAVIGATING THE PARADOX FOR A CREDIBLE OUTCOME

The Ethiopian national dialogue represents the nation's most structured and ambitious attempt to resolve its foundational crises through dialogue. It boasts a sophisticated conceptual framework and has achieved notable scale in grassroots consultations. 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. 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. Hence it remains fundamentally ensnared by the "Constrained Convener" paradox: its creation by the state has precipitated a crisis of legitimacy, excluded pivotal armed stakeholders, and bred widespread distrust.

The 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.

A significant conceptual finding is the emergence of a vibrant ecosystem of deliberation around the official ENDC 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

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 (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 process has successfully built a table, and many have attended as discussed above. However, dominant actors, most notably key armed groups, critical diaspora communities, and some opposition parties remain absent. Without a fundamental reset that addresses this core

contradiction through pluralized oversight, mediated inclusion, and unwavering commitment to equity and transparency the dialogue risks producing an outcome that lacks the broad ownership required for sustainable peace.

While significant challenges persist, including political polarization, security constraints, and uneven regional participation, opportunities exist. Public demand for peace, the moral authority of faith communities, diaspora engagement, and lessons from completed consultations provide a foundation. The path forward is narrow but navigable. It demands courageous political concessions and procedural rigor—such as adaptive sequencing, robust consensus mechanisms, and independent oversight—to transform the dialogue from a state-managed process into a genuinely nationally owned one.

Ultimately, the ENDC represents Ethiopia's most viable platform for national reconciliation. The alternative to its credible and inclusive success is not merely a failed exercise, but the dangerous deepening of the very divisions it was meant to heal. The nation's future stability hinges on bridging the gap between the process's considerable procedural achievements and its still-unmet political prerequisites for legitimacy.

Despite these achievements, significant challenges persist. Political polarization, mistrust between government and opposition actors, security constraints, uneven regional participation, and limited diaspora engagement continue to impede full inclusivity. Consultations in Tigray remain limited due to security and political sensitivities, and questions about ENDC's independence and credibility underscore the need for confidence-building measures and neutral oversight.

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