

The Fourth Conference on National Dialogues

Concept Note

11–12 June 2019, The House of the Estates, Helsinki

Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland in cooperation with Felm, Finn Church Aid and Crisis Management Initiative

The Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland together with a consortium of NGOs is organizing the fourth conference on National Dialogues and non-formal dialogue processes in June 2019 in Helsinki, Finland. The Conference is a continuation of conferences held in April 2014, November 2015 and April 2017. The conferences have enjoyed wide participation and they have provided a space for joint reflection and in-depth discussion with practitioners, stakeholders and experts working with dialogue processes in different contexts.

The National Dialogues Conference is an important initiative of Finland's mediation efforts which emphasise inclusiveness, local ownership and the role of women, youth, religious peacemakers as well as the civil society in peace processes. The fourth conference will again bring together different stakeholders working on national dialogues to share knowledge and lessons, and to promote peer learning to improve the practice of national dialogues.

Background and Objectives

Most contemporary conflicts are internal. Intra-state conflicts often have structural causes, such as inequality or identity. Rarely are such conflicts monocausal and, accordingly, our efforts to resolve them need to address this complexity.

National dialogues place emphasis on internal actors and may be particularly useful in addressing intrastate conflicts with a multiplicity of stakeholders. Working to broaden political ownership national dialogues can ensure more inclusive processes and lasting results. These dialogues come in different forms, with varying aims and intentions – but what is common to them is the aim to expand political participation, to generate new approaches and solutions, or to manage change at critical times. Broad interest has emerged in the potential of national dialogues as an effective approach to prevention, resolution, and transformation of conflict.

The series of National Dialogues Conferences participates in and contributes to the wider debate relating to national dialogues. The conferences create a space for actors working with national dialogues to learn from each other, share experiences and create contacts. In addition, the conferences aim to identify common challenges and develop recommendations for national dialogue processes. The fourth National Dialogues Conference builds on the lessons from previous conferences, with focus on understanding the ecosystems of national dialogues and on exploring what support technology can bring to respond to the complex processes of national dialogues. These core topics will be explored through several geographic focus areas as well as in relation to other recurring themes.

Theme 1: The Ecosystem of National Dialogues

Although most contemporary violent conflicts are intra-state, the dynamics, effects and efforts to mediate them transcend national borders. Peace processes are part of a complex web where local, national, regional and international actors play various roles – be they social, political, military or economic. Conflicts and peace processes are therefore increasingly viewed from the perspective of ecosystems, recognizing the constant interaction between different actors. To understand the ecosystem of national dialogues we need to think holistically, while paying attention also to the parts of the system and how they interact with each other. One key question to be addressed is how to create an inclusive ecosystem, even if all dialogues and tracks are not inclusive?

In this respect, reference could also be made to the discussion on the concept of sustaining peace. The UN has recognized that sustaining peace should be broadly understood as a goal and a process to build a common vision of a society. It is important to ensure that the needs of all segments of the population are taken into account, and that inclusivity is the key to advance national peacebuilding processes and objectives.

Theme 2: New Technologies in Support of National Dialogues

New technologies offer tools for national dialogue processes to increase their reach and impact and to overcome established social practices. New technologies can also support knowledge creation and sharing of knowledge in informal and formal dialogues. For example, new communications tools such as social media can help initiate contact between groups that are in conflict with each other. User friendly data collection tools offer new methods for monitoring and evaluation of online dialogues. Furthermore, online dialogue and digital games can provide new ways for conflict parties to re-imagine a future together

However, the use of new technology also entails new risks and raises ethical questions that need to be considered. It can pose significant risks in states affected by, or at risk of, violent conflict. While, for example, social media can help initiate contact between different groups, it has also proven to contribute to or reinforce polarization along socio-economic, ethnic or religious lines, and it has been used as a tool to provoke hate and violence. It is vital to strengthen analysis of the use of technological tools and the causal shifts in power balances in the conflict ecosystems.

Cross-cutting and Session Specific Topics

This year, the National Dialogues Conference continues to systematically integrate gender in all aspects of the conference by mainstreaming it to all activities. The conference will also deepen the examination of selected substantive topics, that are either topical in multiple national dialogues, or are emergent themes in need of closer examination. Some of the topics include: local governance and federalism, natural resources in national dialogues, reconciliation and integrating psychosocial elements in dialogue processes. Process design will be closely examined, with specific focus on inclusivity and inclusiveness; women, youth and minorities as well.



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