

The Fourth Conference on National Dialogues, 11—12 June 2019

The House of the Estates, Helsinki

Addressing Complexity in National Dialogue Processes

Objective of the session

The objective of the opening session is to illustrate what complexity means especially from the point of view of national dialogues and its ecosystem. How, for example, informal and formal dialogues and mediation at different tracks interact with each other? What are the implications when designing national dialogue processes where different actors – local, national and international – play various roles. Moreover, during the session it will be discussed how fit for purpose national dialogues are and able to influence the complex social systems, social behaviour and relations, affected by conflict. Also, key concepts of national dialogues such as inclusivity and local ownership will be looked at through the lenses of complexity.

Background

The world we live in is highly interdependent. United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres in his inaugural speech to the General Assembly acknowledged that “**conflicts have become more complex and interlinked than ever before**”. Complexity has been recognized as a special feature describing the world as well as conflicts. Complexity theory which is applied to the social world looks at **social behaviour and relations** that are relevant for peacebuilding¹. All social systems are complex systems and, for example, through national dialogue processes, the behaviour of these social systems, affected by conflict, can be influenced.

Peace and dialogue processes themselves also form a complex web where local, national, regional and international actors play various and often overlapping roles – social, political, military, economic. Conflicts and peace processes are therefore increasingly viewed from the perspective of **ecosystems**, where there is constant interaction between the different actors that aim at influencing complex social behaviour and relations. It is said that **one reason for the rising complexity surrounding the peacebuilding is a proliferation in the range of national and international stakeholders and interests that affect peace processes**². To understand the ecosystem of national dialogues we need to think in terms of the whole, while paying attention also to the parts of the system and how they interact with each other.

¹ Emery Brusset, Cedric de Coning, Bryn Hughes (Eds.) (2016), *Complexity thinking for peacebuilding practice and evaluation*

² Cedric de Coning, Stephen Gray (2018), *Adaptive Mediation*

Inclusivity has been widely recognized as one of the key concepts and principles when designing the dialogue processes. It has also been argued that the impact of inclusive processes is considerable: establishing close partnerships with diverse local actors on the ground allows for a better understanding of key concerns and needs. Moreover, in **adaptive peacebuilding** which has been introduced as an approach for tackling complexity, is it crucial that the societies and communities affected by conflict lead and own peacebuilding processes.³

National Dialogues emerged as a **way to manage complex change processes** and in response to the desire to protect national sovereignty. Therefore, National Dialogue practices have been considered as a **viable mechanism for conflict transformation able to accommodate different demands made by national and international stakeholders**. They aim at including a broader range of national stakeholders and addressing a broader range of issues and offer a promise of a transition away from elite deal-making **towards more inclusive and participatory political processes**. However, inclusivity should not only be an end result as inclusive National Dialogue processes do not automatically lead to inclusive outcomes. This also raises the question about legitimacy and ownership of the national dialogue processes, are they legitimate enough – how, for example, the participants for the dialogue are selected and how to ensure the agency and participation of women?

Moreover, it has been argued that **it is difficult for national dialogues to serve for multiple purposes as often is expected or designed**. In this respect it can be asked whether national dialogues can be seen both as the negotiating mechanisms (“making deals”) and drivers for political transformation? In other words, **is it possible under one process to build both a common vision for the nation and enable elite-based bargaining with more support from communities?**⁴ In adaptive peacebuilding approach **uncertainty** has been seen as intrinsic quality of complex systems⁵. It is recognized that our ability to fully know complex systems is inherently limited and it brings forward the question what implications uncertainty has in planning and designing of national dialogue processes.

Key questions

- What are the implications of complexity in national dialogue processes and how to address complexity and uncertainty in process design?
- How to manage and take into consideration the inclusivity of national dialogues in complex environments with increasing number of different stakeholders and interests? How to create an overall inclusive ecosystem, while some of the dialogues and tracks might be exclusive by definition?
- Can national dialogues be seen both as the negotiating mechanisms (“making deals”) and drivers for political transformation?

³ Cedric de Coning (2018), *Adaptive peacebuilding*

⁴ Katia Papagianni (2017), *The promise and perils of national dialogues*

⁵ Cedric de Coning (2018): *Adaptive peacebuilding*

Composition of the session

Keynote:

- Dr. Jan Pospisil, Head of Research, Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution

Moderated panel discussion:

- Dr Alhaji Sarjoh Bah, Head of Conflict Management and Post-Conflict Reconstruction Division, African Union
- Ms Roxaneh Bazergan, Team Leader, Mediation Support Unit, United Nations
- Ms Stine Lehmann-Larsen, Director, Mediation, Policy & European Relations, European Institute of Peace
- Dr Jan Pospisil, Head of Research, Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution
- *Moderator: Mr Itonde Kakoma, Programme Director, CMI*

