

Issue Brief

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Cohort 1: Inclusive Dialogue

Inclusive dialogue in practice

What is inclusive enough and how do we measure inclusion? - The case of Malawi

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Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (Agenda 2030) adopted in September 2015 put inclusivity at the core of sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda's promise, to 'leave no one behind' and include even the most marginalized, places an obligation on development, humanitarian and peace actors to ensure inclusivity in all interventions and processes. This is perhaps especially pertinent in dialogue processes. But what is inclusive enough and how can inclusivity be measured? This policy brief reflects on these questions from a practitioner's perspective – through the lens of a UN Peace and Development Advisor, whose role includes supporting national governments and civil society to create spaces for, and to facilitate, inclusive dialogues.

Assumptions of Inclusive Dialogue

There are many definitions of inclusive dialogue, but for this paper, and guided by a practitioner's field experience, inclusive dialogue is defined as structured and facilitated conversations on an issue of concern by representatives of the various groups and institutions who are affected by or can affect the issue positively or negatively.

Although there is a widely-held assumption that the principle of inclusivity alone improves prospects for conflict transformation and peace, this might not always be the case. Ill-timed inclusion of outlying radical actors may, for instance, enable them to spoil the process. Discussion of 'inclusivity' must therefore go beyond the value attributed to the principle itself and consider problems that emerge with increased societal inclusivity in dialogue and transformation processes. Such challenges and dilemmas may relate to decreasing efficiency, involvement of anti-democratic forces, risk of manipulation by elites, and cosmetic participation (tokenism).¹ Inclusivity in the context of dialogues can ironically even be divisive; the process may mobilize groups (such as youth) into cohesive forces, and by stimulating specific

positions may generate more entrenched 'us' and 'them' identities than existed before dialogue started. The success of interventions for reconciliation and social cohesion thus depends in part on the design and management of the process and how issues are addressed in each specific context.

In the same vein, an inclusive process does not imply that all stakeholders have to participate directly in a formal dialogue. Various methods can facilitate both interaction between stakeholders and inclusion of the broadest possible range of perspectives in the dialogue process.²

Inclusivity is subjective. It can be interpreted and measured in relation to the quantity of representation, e.g. the percentage of women or youth involved in a process. But it can also be interpreted through the lens of capacity, influence and voice – that is, the quality of representation. This important distinction will be discussed below.

Defining Rules of the Game

Given the challenges involved, it is imperative to generate a common understanding of inclusivity when designing dialogue processes. The aim should be a definition derived from a thorough mapping of actors, with gender and age as crosscutting factors. The value that 'inclusivity' is expected to add to a dialogue process should be analysed in advance – during the consultations of organizing partners – to inform methodology and criteria for identifying participants. For example, having equal numbers of women and men around the table may be less productive in providing women's perspectives than including a few women with the knowledge and capacity to articulate those perspectives. Mere presence does not guarantee voice and influence. The same generalization applies to all groups.

Sectarian (and especially political) interests have tried to gain legitimacy and acceptance in dialogue processes by

focusing on numbers rather than the quality of inclusive representation. This invariably has a negative effect on the value and sustainability of outcomes. While numbers alone may be symbolically important, may help to build trust and enhance perceptions of social inclusion, they may not provide the diversity needed for a transformative process.

Analysis of the regional and national “Forums on Inclusivity and Federalism” organized by the Public Affairs Committee (PAC) in Malawi in 2014-15 revealed that, even though inclusivity was the core theme, and despite inclusive geographic and sector representation, women and youth were less represented in both numbers and the ability to participate in and influence the process.³ The method for selecting participants had not been carefully thought through, organizers had requested sectors (political parties, the legislature, traditional chiefs, community and faith based organizations, the Consumers Association of Malawi, National Media Institute of Southern Africa, Indigenous Business Association, Economics Association of Malawi, etc.) to nominate two representatives each, without specific criteria for age or sex. As a result, most of the nominees to the forums were older men, by virtue of their occupying most leadership positions in all sectors of the patriarchal Malawian society.

Public Affairs Committee (PAC)

PAC is an interfaith organization with representation from all the major faith groups in Malawi. It was founded in 1992 and is highly respected in Malawi. Since 2012, the United Nations has supported PAC and its leadership as ‘insider mediators’ - playing the roles of intermediaries between national leaders and as advocates for peace.

With lessons learned from the regional forums, the final national forum was more inclusive in terms of gender representation. But older men dominated all decision-making and hindered women and youth from asserting influence. This was attributed to traditional gender roles and relationships: Malawian society largely requires women and youth to be silent when men are speaking. The selection process, too, remained faulty because women and youth were nominated simply to make up the numbers after criticism of the earlier forums, without regard to their individual capacity to participate. A strategy to identify women of voice and influence could have improved the quality of inclusion (even though this could further marginalize the voiceless). Alternatively, separate forums for women and youth prior to the main forums could have enhanced the quality of participation later.

Results from multi-year (2011 – 2015) research on “Broadening Participation in Political Negotiations and Implementations” indicate that it is the quality of influence that matters, not merely the involvement of more groups.

A policy brief based on that research recommends the following for consideration by practitioners in designing inclusive peace processes:

- Support and lobby for a good mix of inclusion modalities at the negotiation table and beyond in all phases of the process;
- Ensure that included actors can exercise influence by providing support and expertise to societal and political actors beyond the main parties and helping design adequate processes;
- Apply coherent strategies that combine support and empowerment measures with support to the peace process, such as action to reduce violence and elite resistance, and strengthening public buy-in and regional actors’ commitments;
- Strengthen inclusion-awareness among mediators and teams as well as conflict parties;
- Improve monitoring mechanisms during implementation of agreements.

(Thania Paffenholz, Can Inclusive Peace Processes work? New Evidence From a Multi-Year Research Project, Policy Brief, April 2015, The Graduate Institute Geneva, Centre on Conflict, Development and Peacebuilding, Inclusive Peace and Transition Initiative.)

Recommendations for Measuring Inclusion

How can we know whether high-quality inclusion has been achieved or not? After having clearly defined and generated a common understanding of inclusion among partners, it is imperative to identify indicators of success by which inclusion in dialogue can be measured.⁴ The following indicators are suggested:

- The number of key stakeholders’ groups (identified through prior mapping) represented at each level (Track 1,2,3);
- The number of participants’ contributions disaggregated per groups, for example how many times did women or youth or a constituency contribute on a particular issue;
- Perceptions of freedom from fear of participation – Have people felt safe enough to participate and actively share views?
- Perceptions of physical safety of the dialogue location – Did people feel safe enough to go to the identified dialogue location?
- Proportion of women represented;
- The number of supplementary processes with ‘excluded groups’;
- The number of group or media protests of exclusion;
- The perception of participating groups – satisfaction with the process, a sense of being heard;
- The perception of broader community; whether an inclusive dialogue process was seen to be inclusive and effective;
- Follow-up and implementation of recommendations of an inclusive dialogue process by relevant authorities.

While the numbers in inclusive dialogue processes count, it is important to make them meaningful. This understanding should guide the planning process and the definition of inclusion. Other recommendations are:

- Clearly defined methodology and criteria for inclusivity;
- Gender analysis of the issue at stake to inform participant identification criteria;
- Assessment of the dialogue capacities of the parties;
- A strategy to balance identified inequalities in capacity: Some participants to a dialogue may have disproportionate skills, knowledge and resources. This was the case in the UN-facilitated dialogue between the Government of Malawi and Civil Society Leaders between July and September 2011.⁵ To bridge such inequalities or reduce the level of inequality, the strategy could include a program of capacity development prior to the actual dialogue. This could involve supplementary dialogues with different sectors to raise awareness and identify representatives. It is imperative that such a strategy be handled transparently, in consultation with all parties.
- Clear indicators of inclusivity should be spelled out prior to implementation of any dialogue process, in order to achieve the maximum effect.⁶

Conclusion

Research and practice have shown that inclusivity adds value to dialogue processes. Intrinsically positive qualities of inclusivity cannot be assumed, however, nor can quantitative representation be deemed to be inclusive enough. There must be a conscious effort and strategy to ensure a balance between quantity and quality.

Where inclusivity across divisions is not an immediate option for highly sensitive political contexts or in situations where there is fear of 'negative influence' by spoilers, supplementary processes should be encouraged.

Finally, genuine inclusivity occurs when all those who need to be heard have had an opportunity to participate in the broad dialogue process, and have the capacity to articulate their needs in a psychologically and physically safe space.

Malawi - National and regional forums on inclusivity and federalism - 2014/2015

Malawi's 2014 tripartite (Presidential, Parliamentary and Local Council) elections were particularly divisive, and the remaining rancor polarized the nation. An acrimonious expression of public opinion and interest around the value of devolution, and various models thereof heightened post-election tensions, with some groups from the Northern and Central Regions (strongholds of opposition parties) advocating secession or federalism.

An analysis of the devolution debate with key stakeholders recommended an inclusive dialogue that could transform the acrimonious debate into constructive discourse, and

better place Malawi to choose an informed path. The Public Affairs Committee (PAC) offered to conduct the dialogue. Government and other parties accepted the offer with an understanding of its objectives as follows:

- To generate a common understanding of inclusivity and devolution: and the various options including federalism;
- To generate common understanding of the drivers of the debate and key issues at stake;
- To develop an agreed roadmap on next steps and thus provide input to the formal decision-makers.
- A total of four dialogues were subsequently held:
- "National Stakeholders Forum on Inclusivity and Federalism" – 24-25 November 2014;
- Three follow-up regionals recommended from the national forum – Southern – 15 & 16 June 2015; Centre – 18-19 June 2015; and Northern – 22-23 June 2015;
- A final national validation forum on recommendations of the forums – 1 November 2015.

The Dialogues were planned and implemented by a PAC constituted 'Technical Committee' comprised of representatives of key stakeholders. The UN through the Resident Coordinator and PDA provided technical support.

Notes

1. Katrin Planta, Vanessa Prinz and Luxshi Vimalarajah, 2015. Inclusivity in National Dialogues – Guaranteeing Social Integration or Preserving Old Power Hierarchies? Inclusive Political Settlements, Background Paper 1. Berlin: Berghof Foundation.
2. United Nations Guidance for Effective Mediation; see <http://peacemaker.un.org/guidance-effective-mediation>.
3. "Report on Understanding the Question of Inclusivity and Federalism", Public Affairs Committee, November 2014.
4. This is based on reflections and lessons learned from supporting the Public Affairs Committee in facilitating inclusive dialogues between 2013 and 2016.
5. Anna Shotton, Impact Assessment of DPA's Preventive Diplomacy Efforts in Malawi from July to September 2011, March 2014.
6. Outlining these should be a participatory process conducted by the Steering Committee or Technical Committee (as in the case of Malawi) or whichever body is responsible for planning and implementing the dialogue.

About the PDA Fellowship:

UNDP's Oslo Governance Center in partnership with the Joint UNDP-DPA Programme has established a PDA Fellowship Programme in 2016 consisting of several cohorts, each involving between 4-6 PDA's and/or PDA like conflict prevention specialists over a period of two weeks. The Fellowship Programme involves guided reflections to help draw out the Fellows' experience on pre-identified conflict prevention and peacebuilding issues.

About the author:

Becky Adda-Dontoh is the PDA in Malawi. She has over twenty-five years of experience in public relations and peace building and is a gender advocate. She founded an NGO, 'Mothers for Active Non-Violence', in 2005 to advocate women's participation in peace building and was actively involved in the establishment and training of Ghana's nascent Regional and District Peace Committees in 2006- 2007. Becky has country experience in Ghana, the Philippines, Nigeria and Malawi.

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