

# The Experience of National Dialogue in Guatemala

Presentation to the  
Conference on International Experiences on National Dialogue,  
Paramaribo, March 5-6, 2014

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# Definitions

- National Dialogue:
  - a multi-stakeholder engagement (state and society)
  - A deliberative process (debate and decision making)
  - Issues of national scope (visions, agendas or policies)
- Scope: National Dialogue experiences in Guatemala after 1996

# On the context

1996

- One decade of democratization (1986-1996)
  - Democracy begat peace
- 36 years of internal armed conflict
  - More than 200,000 deaths
  - A militarized state – counterinsurgent structures
  - A polarized society – racism + ideological cleavages
  - An authoritarian political culture
  - A legacy of poverty, discrimination, exclusion, underdevelopment
    - A poor people in a rich country

# On the context

- Peace Accords
  - 6 years of negotiation:
    - Ended armed confrontation
      - Conditions for political re-integration of armed insurgency (ddr)
    - Agenda for transformation of the state
      - 10 specific agreements on issues like human rights, demilitarization, indigenous rights, social and economic development, etc.
      - Including basic agreements on principles and goals

# On the context

## Challenges:

- Socializing the Peace Accords (from a bilateral to a national agreement)
  - PA negotiated between government and insurgents, UN facilitation, w/ limited (influence/representativity) civil society input
  - Weak convening capacity of political institutions (congress, political parties, ministries, etc.)
- Turn the issue-specific agreements into policy (action)
  - Political agreement on operational action

# National Dialogues

- National Dialogues were used as a mechanism to address these issues:
  - Developing a common vision
  - Legitimizing a national agenda
  - Developing sectoral policies

# National Dialogues 1996-2006 (a partial list)

## NATIONAL AGENDA AND/OR COMMON VISION

- War Torn Societies Project
- Encuentros para la Actualizacion
- Vision Guatemala
- Inter-party dialogue
- Dialogue Roundtables

## SECTORAL POLICIES

- Fiscal Policy
- Indigenous rights
- Demilitarization, defense and public security
- Education
- Health and Nutrition
- Social services

# National Dialogues 1996-2006

- **Different configurations and modalities**
  - Convened by Government, convened by Civil Society, convened by the International Community
  - Different degree of external financial and technical support (UN/OAS/bilaterals/ingo's)
  - High level of local ownership (even if convened by international community, through local actors)
- **Adding up to a “dialogic” process**
  - Beyond the events, into a social dynamic



# National Dialogues 2006-2014

- National agenda was no longer post-conflict
- Dialogue of “National” scope carried out on only one issue:
  - Rural Development Policy (under 2 governments)
- But dialogue pursued on narrow issues, through
  - bilateral negotiations (government/teachers; Chixoy)
  - Or institutionalized frameworks (Congress, ad-hoc commissions, etc.)

# Assessing National Dialogues: a cumulative balance

## What resulted out of this dynamic?

### ■ Dialogue Results

- **Concrete Outputs** > the specific products achieved through the dialogue process:
  - Reaching understandings (perceptions and knowledge), Agreements (intentions and goals), Proposals (actions)
- **Intangible Outcomes** > the contribution of the process to the peacebuilding (consolidation of peace/democratization) needs:
  - Transforming attitudes, instilling skills, creating channels of communication, accruing legitimacy

# Assessing National Dialogues: a cumulative balance

## “Good” dialogues

- **Outputs (policy impact):**
  - better understanding of issues and challenges (security)
  - better understanding of reciprocal needs and positions (indigenous rights)
  - shared principles, goals (vision Guatemala)
  - policy recommendations, draft legislation, action plans (POLSEDE/POLSEC, Pacto Fiscal, etc.)
- **Outcomes (process impact):**
  - A political elite (political parties, civil society) more skilled and confident in dialogue
  - Channels for inter-sectoral communication (within society, between society and state)
  - Civil society strengthened and legitimized as a partner in policy formulation

# Assessing National Dialogues: a cumulative balance

## “Bad” dialogues

- **Outputs (policy impact):**
  - no policy impact, no/irrelevant results
  - negative policy impact (“illegitimate” results through imposition, manipulation of participation, etc.)
- **Outcomes (process impact):**
  - entrenched conflict
  - enhanced mistrust
  - political cynicism

# Assessing National Dialogues: a cumulative balance

**Successful National Dialogue** –well designed, well prepared, well implemented, well followed upon-  
contributes to society at two levels:

- **To its present:** it will result in a national agreement on the critical issue discussed, diffusing tensions and conflict around it, and enabling effective action to implement it.
- **To its future:** it will build trust between participants in each other; strengthen hope and optimism in participants –and in society- about the future. Develops the skills of participants to make further use of dialogue when dealing with tensions and disagreements.

# Assessing National Dialogues: a cumulative balance

**Failed National Dialogue** -badly planned, carelessly prepared, wrongly executed, not followed-upon- can deepen the cleavages and tensions in society.

- Not only will it leave the issues that were discussed unresolved;
- it will heighten mistrust and suspicion among participants;
- it will entrench parties into their positions;
- it will reinforce the idea that it's useless to talk to the other side and that action –often violent action- is the only recourse available.

# Assessing National Dialogues: a peacebuilding balance

- *National Dialogues have contributed to the strengthening of Guatemalan society's capacity to address conflict without recourse to coercion or violence.*
  - Root causes of conflict have not been resolved; new problems emerge; political system/institutions still not fully functional; political cynicism and opportunism thrive, but
  - 18 years on: no relapse into armed conflict; residual political violence;
  - Dialogue continues to be in demand

# Lessons Learned

## 1. Dialogue is not a substitute for strategy

- Not a panacea. Sometimes other solutions will work best.
- Dialogue is a tool that needs to be inscribed into a wider, longer term political strategy.
- W/O a strategy, probability of negative outcomes enhanced (dialogue fatigue; political cynicism, entrenchment, polarization)



# Assessing National Dialogues: some lessons learned

## 2. National ownership is collective ownership

- Government ownership is not synonymous with national ownership
  - not about who convenes, but how the process is implemented
  - Inclusiveness, participation, balance and fairness
- National ownership: from design to implementation

# Assessing National Dialogues: some lessons learned

## 3. Civil society is a strategic partner

- In contexts of relatively weak or dysfunctional government institutions, CS can play multiple roles, from convener to technical expert.
- CS became the “critical agent” for the PA implementation process: generating demand, mobilizing support, providing input.

# Lessons Learned

## 4. Strong methodology, strong results

- Improvisation and superficiality breed failure, specially if compounded with political opportunism
- Successful dialogues combined:
  - a strong political mandate
  - Research and dialogue methods
  - capable technical secretariat
- Dialogue methodologies: mix and match
- Learn from best and worst practices, don't copy

# Lessons Learned

## 5. Plan for the outcomes

- Outcomes have longer “shelf life” than outputs
- Invest time and resources working on the “intangibles” -attitudes, skills, perceptions, etc.- both as a preparation for the outputs, and beyond them
- Best dialogues designed a follow-up strategy , building on the outcomes to ensure further impact.