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Op-ed

THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE: PATHWAY TO A PEOPLE'S PLAN FOR SOUTH AFRICA

By Dr Klaus Kotzé

A national dialogue is an inclusive and transparent negotiating mechanism that is used to influence and give shape to a socio-political consensus. The calls for such a process have grown louder following the electoral shift from single-party rule, with the Government of National Unity being an expression of where the country finds itself. In the way that negotiation and consensus brought about the Government of National Unity, so too a national dialogue offers the opportunity to unite South Africans around a common vision, thereby giving rise to a people of national unity.

Whereas President Ramaphosa's vocal support for a national dialogue is to be appreciated, the national dialogue should not be led by government alone, nor should it be steered by any one sector. Instead, it must entail an extensive negotiation between all sectors of society. For the national dialogue to be authoritative and for its goals and programmes to be effective, the active participation and assent of all of society is required. It is from its democratic participation and accord that a national dialogue receives its legitimacy, and it is its legitimacy that affords it power.

The intention that goes into its formation and the way a national dialogue is put together is of utmost importance. In a give-and-take manner it must engage the diverse views and interests of all participants. The goal is then to deliver a constructive settlement. A consensual programme of action that the different parties can accept and implement.

This process of claiming political agency, mobilising towards a cause, is not new in South Africa. In fact, South Africa's culture of political mobilisation is a national asset which if rekindled can substantially advance the national project. In the manner that the Freedom Charter claimed that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, and that the people shall govern, so too the myriad formations of the 1980s rallied around and then realised the concepts of people's power and a people's government. It was through claiming political agency that political agency was attained. So too it must be through inclusive measures that collectively address inequality, that a more inclusive and equal society will be engendered.

While the negotiations and consultations of the 1990s established a value-based South African national order, bringing about the settlement of disorder and separateness, no supplementary people-driven programme of societal action was established so to ensure equitable and just transformation. Instead, the government, as the authoritative representatives of the people, was singularly charged to give expression to development through the realm of governmental policy.

The national dialogue must rekindle and restore public participation as the expression of people's power. By engaging in the process, citizens position themselves at the centre of power. The constitution makes it clear: in a representative democracy the public shall be given the space to influence policy outcomes that give expression to the will of the people. Not only did the government capture and overly centralise political power during the last 30 years, thereby not fulfilling its constitutional mandate to adequately facilitate and incorporate public participation, but the public has also failed to move beyond simple electoral representation.

It is imperative that a potential national dialogue be structured to allow for a protracted, open and engaging space for talking and listening. But the national dialogue cannot only be a talk-shop. Its structure must be goals- and outcomes oriented. In doing so, the very process of the dialogue will see to it that new perceptions emerge. When different actors from different cultures navigate in good faith to find each other, they will craft new meanings and, in the process, quite tangibly build the nation. They will give expression to the present moment and its' predicaments. Much like Desmond Tutu's claim that South Africans are the rainbow people of God, thereby uniting black and white during the transition, so too new understandings, new rhetorical mechanisms will emerge when the different sectors deliberate about the present moment.

Thorough preparation will be central to its success. Before its commencement, the national dialogue must establish its independent relationship to the existing state institutions. It must be clear about its mandate and where it fits into the legal and political system. Its powers, decision-making ability and dispute resolution mechanisms, along with other technical aspects must be clarified before it can start its proceedings. So too, it must be determined where the process will be allocated. Which government department will fund and oversee the proceedings.

The first step would be to convene a preparatory committee to assemble all aspects required for the dialogue. Where countries are in transition, the preparatory committees are typically steered by a collective comprising a variety of factions. In the case of South Africa, a constitutional democracy, the Constitutional Court is the legitimate authority. The Constitutional Court could thus lead the process by assembling a preparatory committee, as was the case during the CODESA proceedings. By doing so, it lends it legitimacy. This committee must be broadly representative, thereby averting the criticisms lodged against CODESA, that it was dominated by the political elite. Once the committee is elected the court would withdraw from the proceedings.

The CODESA proceedings offer a useful schema to guide the national dialogue. While the preparatory committee would conceive of the national dialogue framework, the totality of participants would convene to design its structure, assign its substance, select its steering committee and designate its working groups.

It is critical that all parties to the dialogue collectively commit to a shared basic programme of action. The dialogue's participants should take from CODESA and the Government of National Unity. Both are led by a Declaration or Statement of Intent. Documents that establish how the parties would work together, and how a common goal would bind them together. By detailing and agreeing to these details, the diverse participants would be able to collectively pursue the same end from their different means and ways.

Much like the Constitutional Assembly process, the national dialogue should undertake an extensive communication and public participation programme. It is imperative that South Africans not only be informed about the dialogue but that they actively take part therein. People should be able to contribute to its substantive nature, so to take ownership of the process and its outcomes. The public participation programme would be most effective when it is widely mediatised, so to ensure accessibility and transparency.

After the extensive public participation programme, the accumulated views and inputs would be synchronised and brought to the final plenaries. In this manner, the outcomes will be a truly South African product of its people. Here a final People's Plan for South Africa will be debated and then assembled.

As a democracy with a consultative political culture, a Plan that is visibly and audibly a product of the people, one that gives expression to their lived realities and that arose from their experiences will have the potential to be truly transformative. It will be a democratic product, a common vision that everyone can feel that they have a say in and can take ownership over. The National Development Plan should not be discarded, but as government's plan it should be consulted and aligned so to underpin the People's Plan.

The national dialogue and a People's Plan offer the opportunity to remake the nation. To move South Africa away from its unsustainable path as an unequal society. To bring about constitutional transformation that is real and felt. And to instil meaning and purpose, so as to truly give expression to a united national identity.

Dr Klaus Kotzé is a Research Associate at the Inclusive Society Institute. This article is an extract from the Institute's soon to be released paper 'The National dialogue: Pathway to a People's Plan for South Africa'.