



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE IS NOT ABOUT POLITICIANS TALKING. IT IS ABOUT PEOPLE DOING

*By Dr Klaus Kotzé*

South Africa is on the right track. The National Dialogue has captured the nation, and the country is yet again proving itself to be a deliberative society. This is not a side show, a distraction. This is the nation returning to its democratic strength. Moving the country forward by creating meaning in the truest of democratic ways, deliberation.

Since President Ramaphosa formally announced the National Dialogue on June 10<sup>th</sup>, a vigorous, free-wheeling conversation has emerged. Whereas broad sectors of society have welcomed the initiative, others have launched pre-emptive attacks. Broadly, those responding to the Dialogue's intention of progressively addressing ongoing national concerns have been favourable. Criticism has generally been in response to the perception that the Dialogue will be a political event attended by elites.

While differing opinions should be welcomed and engaged, the record should be set straight. The National Dialogue will be a public process, driven and realised by civil society. The process should not be politicised and is not the initiative of any political grouping. Instead, it belongs to the nation as a whole.

Whereas National Dialogues typically take place in countries undergoing political transition, where legitimacy then emerges from a broad range of stakeholders finding common ground, the South African Executive was the correct authority to afford the process its Constitutional legitimacy. It is commendable that the President stressed that "the Dialogue will be a people-led, society-wide process...a chance for all South Africans, from all walks of life, to come together and help shape the next chapter of our democracy". While the ideas and concepts planted by the President were important, it is lamentable that he did not comprehensively detail the process and the roles of the different actors.

It is from this communication gap that ambiguity and misinformation have spread. Crucially, the work of the National Dialogue did not commence on June 10<sup>th</sup>. Instead, for years, South Africans have been advancing a broadly inclusive, strategic process to pragmatically address socio-economic injustice. In the past two decades this was often referred to as an Economic CODESA. Recognising that while political negotiations in the 1990s established a value-based South African order, no supplementary, people-driven programme of action was established to ensure equitable and just socio-economic transformation.

Following the call for "a new and truly inclusive National Dialogue" by former President Thabo Mbeki on 30 April 2024, the National Foundations named after eminent South African leaders began meeting to prepare for a citizens-led initiative. Around the same time, President Ramaphosa expressed his support for the call for a National Dialogue. While the Presidency has offered

significant support and guidance, the preparatory work has been driven by the National Foundations, proving the process to be one of and by the people.

It is unfortunate that the President did not mention the preceding and ongoing preparatory work during his announcement. By establishing the Eminent Persons Group, to guide and champion the National Dialogue, the perception emerged that these individuals would be tasked with the Dialogue's initiation and organisational work. Instead, the Group's significance is in transferring the State's legitimacy to the initiative. This transfer further delinks the Dialogue from politics and places it into the public realm, encouraging citizens to actively define it through their participation.

Furthermore, a crucial distinction should be observed. Whereas the National Dialogue Convention, scheduled for 15 August, will bring together a broad cross-section of representatives in an agenda-setting forum, to plot a road-map for the broader initiative, the real process will unfold among citizens in sectoral dialogues. It is not the sole responsibility of these roughly 1000 representatives to subsequently initiate dialogues in their communities. Instead, the first step towards a successful Dialogue process starts with you and me. To heed the call, and to initiate dialogues in our backyards, offices and church halls. As active citizens, we must seize our democratic responsibility.

The Dialogue is ultimately about citizens giving pragmatic expression to the values and principles of the Constitution. Ideals that can no longer remain conceptual. The main goal of the Dialogue is to agree on a programme of action whereby these ideals are made real in the lives of South Africans.

Those saying that South Africa has sufficient (unfulfilled) plans and policies fail to see their opportunity to enact direct democracy. Such a programme is not a government plan; it is a contemporary People's Plan whereby citizens collectively create pathways going forward. It allows us to demand accountability. Not only waiting on the government, but by decentring governance to the locality. Supplanting perceived government failure through claiming democratic agency.

By legitimising the Dialogue, the government has admitted that the only way to a capable state is through the citizens taking active and real action in the affairs of the state.

To do so, we must first talk (and listen) to each other. Find common ground and redefine what it means to be South African. In a world where democracies are fast losing touch with their people-centred foundations, the Dialogue offers a rare and significant opportunity.

While critique is valuable and necessary, our national condition is too fragile to survive the inaction of people simply shouting in. Democracies do not only fail because of the malfeasance of governments. They fail when citizens do not actively get involved.

The National Dialogue represents a rare promise for the diversity of our people to see and come to understand each other. Our democracy only became possible when a generation of leaders and followers understood the importance of recognising and accepting each other. Democratic South Africa was realised through deliberation. Now, in order to realise a better future for all, we need to come together to craft and then enact a People's Plan of Action.

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