Zimbabwe:
National dialogue.
A Panacea to the Protracted Conflict?

Octavious Chido MASUNDA

Abstract: National dialogue has emerged across Africa as a contested tool for conflict resolution and governance reform. This article examines Zimbabwe's case, where cycles of electoral dispute, authoritarian resilience, and failed settlements have perpetuated crises. Based on qualitative interviews with stakeholders from politics, civil society, academia, and faith institutions, the study finds strong consensus that national dialogue must be inclusive, transformative, and nationally owned. Lessons from past initiatives—including the Internal Settlement, Lancaster House Agreement, Unity Accord, the Global Political Agreement, and POLAD—highlight that exclusion, weak enforcement, and partisan convening undermine legitimacy. Respondents envision national dialogue—led reforms in electoral governance, security sector accountability, socio-economic compacts, and social cohesion, yet warn that entrenched mistrust, power imbalances, and authoritarian adaptation remain significant barriers. The paper proposes a framework for context-sensitive national dialogue in Zimbabwe, emphasizing credible facilitation, legal entrenchment, civic education, and regional guarantorship. It concludes that national dialogue offers both promise and peril: a potential catalyst for structural transformation, but equally a risk of entrenching authoritarianism if not institutionally safeguarded—especially in the absence of a strategic hurting stalemate and a fragmented opposition.

Keywords: Zimbabwe, national dialogue, conflict transformation, authoritarianism, democratic transition, peacebuilding.

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Introduction

The main research question of this paper examines the extent to which an inclusive national dialogue process can facilitate sustainable peace and resolve longstanding political conflicts alongside ongoing authoritarian consolidation in Zimbabwe. The country's political landscape has been characterized by a continuum of violence spanning pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial periods, with violence serving as an entrenched tool for political control (Nyere, 2016). Following independence in 1980, Zimbabwe experienced several violent epochs that reflect deep historical and political tensions (Kufakurinani, 2021). The Gukurahundi massacres of 1981–1986 in parts of the Midlands and Matabeleland provinces marked the first major post-independence violence (Dzimiri et al., 2014; Mashingaidze, 2010). The controversial Fast Track Land Reform Programme, beginning in 1999–2000, triggered widespread violence and economic decline (Mlambo, 2014; Sachikonye, 2011). Operation Murambatsvina (Clean the Filth) in 2005 represented state violence against suspected opposition supporters (Shale, 2007). Post-2000 electoral violence became systematic, rooted in liberation war history and identity politics, with state-sponsored violence becoming institutionalized (Dzimiri et al., 2014; Kwashirai, 2023). This culture of impunity drove millions into the diaspora and undermined democratic processes (Sachikonye, 2011; Mashingaidze, 2010). These challenges, coupled with post-2017
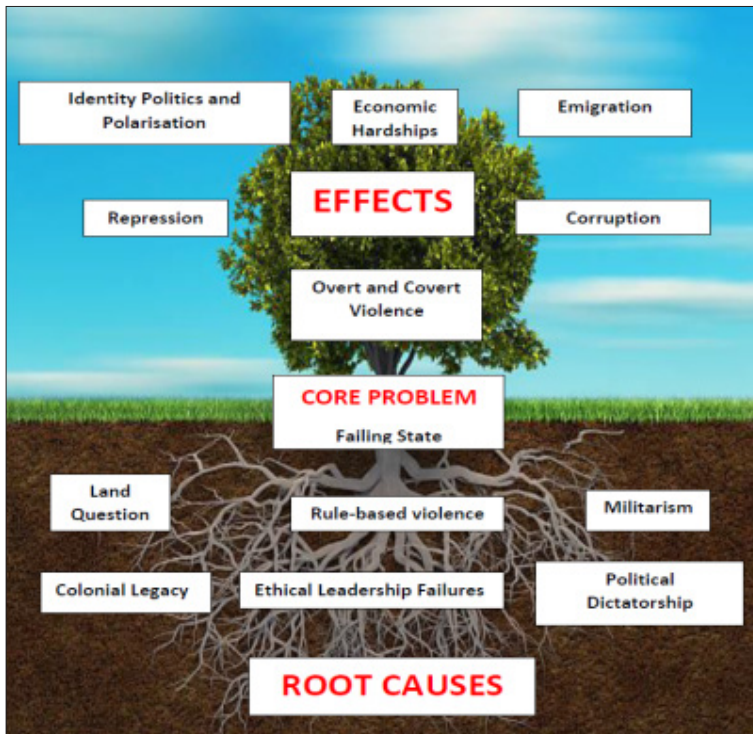

Figure 1. Conflict Tree analysis of the Zimbabwe crises

coup authoritarian consolidation, have generated wider calls for national dialogue as a pathway out of the crisis.

These calls for national dialogue from a wide array of sectors—including industry, civil society, churches, politicians, and even government—necessitate a comprehensive understanding of national dialogue as a potential mechanism for sustainable peace and democratic transition. To address the main research question, the paper focuses on three aspects. First, it provides a conceptual clarification of national dialogues in conflict transformation. Second, it presents an analysis of historical dialogue failures and successes in Zimbabwe, identifying structural components crucial for the genuine redress of grievances. The analysis further explores the specific conditions under which national dialogue can effectively challenge authoritarian structures and promote the restoration of democratic institutions, particularly given the weakened state of the opposition in Zimbabwe.

The paper adopts a qualitative approach centered on face-to-face, in-depth interviews with selected stakeholders. Recognizing that state-led dialogue efforts face challenges due to their top-down nature, this methodology seeks to capture a diverse range of perspectives. Participants were drawn from the fields of human rights, politics, gender studies, the church, civil society organizations, and academia to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent in promoting inclusive national dialogues. Engaging with actors from various sectors enabled the researcher to move beyond elite-level perspectives and incorporate the voices of those directly involved in or affected by national dialogue processes.

National Dialogue

National dialogue is a politically grounded, nationally owned process designed to promote inclusive, deliberative conversation among a broad spectrum of stakeholders within a country, aimed at addressing deep political crises, conflicts, or significant political transitions. National dialogues are recognized as vital tools for resolving political conflicts, promoting state-building, and facilitating peaceful transformation (Mandikwaza, 2025). These inclusive negotiation processes involve diverse societal actors, including civil society, politicians, and experts, to address intractable conflicts and negotiate political reforms (Paffenholz & Ross, 2016). Unlike conventional negotiation mechanisms, which often involve a limited number of elite actors, national dialogues engage multiple layers of society to build consensus, manage conflict, or implement fundamental changes in state-society relations through institutional reform or constitutional change.

The concept of national dialogue has gained prominence in recent years as a flexible and potentially transformative tool for conflict resolution and peacebuilding. It has been applied across diverse contexts, from short-term crisis prevention and political deadlock resolution, as seen in Tunisia, to longer-term nation-redefining efforts seeking to establish a new social contract and governance structures, exemplified by Yemen (Elayah et al.,

2018). At its essence, a national dialogue distinguishes itself not merely by its outcomes but by its emphasis on process. The focus lies in creating an inclusive, consensus-driven forum where dialogue spans across different social groups and political actors nationwide (Saunders, 1999). It differs from mediation or ceasefire negotiations primarily through its comprehensive national organization, participatory breadth, and process orientation. External actors typically play supporting or facilitative roles, allowing the dialogue to remain nationally owned and led.

While national dialogues hold significant promise for conflict resolution through inclusive engagement, they are better positioned to strengthen existing elite agreements rather than develop initial commitment to dialogue (Papagianni, 2021). Success depends on several important factors, including political will, inclusion, transparency, credible conveners, and flexible adaptation to changing political realities (Papagianni, 2021; Getahun, 2023). Trust-building and local ownership are essential preconditions, though external involvement may be necessary (Elayah et al., 2018). Comparative analyses reveal mixed outcomes, with Tunisia's post-Arab Spring dialogue proving more successful than Yemen's in achieving social cohesion (Hamidi, 2015). Research indicates that while most dialogues reach agreements, approximately half fail to implement them effectively (Getahun, 2023).

Table 1. Typologies of national dialogue

Typology	Primary Aim	Example	Key Features
Constitutional/ Foundation	New constitution or settlement	South Africa	Broad-based, legal/structural focus
Conflict Resolution	End civil war/violence	Yemen, Kenya	Power-sharing, transitional mechanisms
Socio-economic Reform	Address economic/historic injustice	Tunisia	Economic/social inclusion, reform
Sectoral Policy	Reform specific sector	Water/sanitation dialogues	Issue-specific, stakeholder-led
Transitional Justice	Address past abuses	Truth commissions	Focus on truth, justice, reconciliation
Hybrid/ Multi-issue	Multiple combined aims	Ethiopia (planned)	Comprehensive, cross-sectoral

The typologies described above illustrate the variety of forms national dialogues can take: from constitutional negotiations and conflict resolution to sectoral and justice-oriented approaches. Their design must be tailored to the specific context to ensure meaningful, legitimate, and sustainable results (Andualem, 2022; Mbombo, 2017; Mandikwaza, 2025; Marumahoko, 2020).

Past Dialogue Initiatives in Zimbabwe: Successes and Failures

From the struggles against colonial rule to the challenges of post-independence nation-building, dialogue initiatives have played a pivotal role in shaping Zimbabwe's politics. Zimbabwe's national dialogue processes from 1978 to 2023 encompassed four major peace agreements aimed at resolving political conflicts and achieving sustainable peace. The 1978 Internal Settlement, the 1979 Lancaster House Agreement, the 1987 Unity Accord, and the 2008 Global Political Agreement each attempted to address Zimbabwe's difficult political challenges (Munemo, 2016). The Lancaster House Agreement, emerging from Anglo-American negotiations, established the framework for Zimbabwe's independence, though it maintained imperialist-dominated socio-economic structures (Sibanda, 1990; Scarnecchia, 2017). The Unity Accord pacified violent conflict between ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU parties, while the Global Political Agreement created a Government of National Unity between ZANU-PF and MDC formations following the 2008 electoral crisis (Mukuhlani, 2014; Raftopoulos, 2010). Despite providing opportunities for national healing and reconciliation, these processes faced significant challenges, with civil society organizations, including churches, marginalized in reconciliation efforts (Munemo & Nciizah, 2014; Chigora & Guzura, 2011).

The fifth attempt at dialogue, the Political Actors Dialogue (POLAD), was characterized as a "quiet conversation." Established in 2019 following Zimbabwe's disputed 2018 harmonized elections, POLAD was framed by the government as an inclusive platform for political engagement, reconciliation, and reform. It brought together leaders of smaller opposition parties and independent actors to deliberate on economic, political, and governance challenges facing the country.

The aforementioned national dialogue processes failed due to multiple interconnected factors across these major agreements. The 1978 Internal Settlement, 1979 Lancaster House Agreement, 1987 Unity Accord, and 2008 Global Political Agreement were undermined by persistent colonial legacies that produced postcolonial leadership practicing violent, repressive politics (Munemo, 2016). Wartime competition between nationalist parties continued during implementation, setting the stage for post-independence genocide and violence (Kriger, 1998). The Lancaster House Agreement failed to address underlying political tensions between rival ZANU-PF and PF-ZAPU parties and their respective armed wings (Kriger, 2021). The 1987 and 2008 power-sharing arrangements served elite self-interests rather than national interests, lacking genuine popular involvement (Chinyere & Rukema, 2020; Masunda & Hlatshwayo, 2024). Structural flaws and implementation problems in the Global Political Agreement undermined democratization prospects (LeBas, 2014). Civil-military coalitions prioritized political survival over developmental goals, engaging in predatory corruption and violent suppression of opposition (Bratton & Masunungure, 2011). These hastily negotiated settlements lacked strong leadership commitments, preventing rules from taking root and inhibiting democratic progress (Bratton & Masunungure, 2011). Major opposition formations, particularly the MDC

Alliance (later CCC), rejected POLAD, arguing that it was a state-engineered process designed to legitimize President Emmerson Mnangagwa's administration rather than address Zimbabwe's deep-seated crises. While POLAD contributed to the language of political dialogue and created limited spaces for policy engagement, it ultimately proved ineffective as a genuine national dialogue platform. Its design and implementation reinforced the resilience of the ruling regime and deepened political fragmentation.

Findings

Defining national dialogue

Respondents in the study consistently viewed national dialogue as a structured, inclusive, and nationally owned process, distinct from elite pacts or post-election bargains. Their views emphasise that national dialogue should not be a closed-door negotiation among a select few, but rather a transparent and participatory process that involves a broad spectrum of stakeholders.

> *A national dialogue means a discussion on national issues, like how we elect our leadership, economic plans, and policy-making. As such, it should involve the whole nation, not just politicians* (Respondent 1, Peace scholar).

> *To me, national dialogue captures a nationally owned, broadly inclusive, time-bound process where political actors, state institutions, civil society, business, churches, youth, women, labour, traditional leaders, and the diaspora engage, facilitated by credible, impartial conveners, to negotiate reforms and shared rules of the game. In Zimbabwe, this means moving beyond elite pacts or post-election damage control to a structured forum with a mandate, an agenda, and enforcement mechanisms that address the political settlement itself (how power is won, exercised, restrained, and alternated) alongside socio-economic grievances* (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

> *National dialogue in Zimbabwe is at two levels. The first one is the general level, the second being a focussed level. The first refers to how Zimbabweans, as citizens, in their communities exchange ideas and conversations, opinions on a daily basis. The focussed level aims at resolving community/ national crises. Citizens may desire to engage in debates to look for solutions that affect them all, this can be led by institutions with an agreed agenda. Leadership from interest groups becomes important in this regard* (Respondent 10, National Democratic Working Group (NDWG)).

Based on the responses, national dialogue represents an engagement that ensures outcomes reflect the diverse interests and concerns of the population, thereby promoting greater legitimacy and ownership. The structured nature of the dialogue entails a clear framework with defined objectives, rules of engagement, and mechanisms for implementation. This

framework provides a roadmap for the process, ensuring discussions remain focused and productive, and that agreements are translated into concrete actions.

National dialogue should not only address immediate crises or specific grievances but also aim to transform the underlying relationships and attitudes that perpetuate conflict. This requires creating spaces for dialogue and interaction, fostering empathy and understanding, and cultivating a sense of shared identity and purpose.

> *Citizens of this country are concerned about the state of the nation. For the longest time, they have been demanding space to debate issues of concern, and national dialogue is one such platform where we can discuss the toxic body politic of the country, the faltering economy, and the social decay we are witnessing, for instance, drug and substance abuse* (Respondent 6, Church leader)

Respondents also perceived national dialogue as an opportunity to reset Zimbabwe's political, social, and economic contract. This view suggests that the existing social contract, which defines the rights and responsibilities of citizens and the state, is no longer adequate or legitimate. This inadequacy stems from historical injustices, systemic inequalities, and a lack of trust in government institutions. National dialogue can enable Zimbabweans to collectively redefine the terms of their social contract, creating a new framework for governance and development that is more inclusive, equitable, and sustainable.

> *The only way for national dialogue to work in Zimbabwe is if it takes a transformative approach, given that we have experienced various epochs of conflict in the country. It becomes important to deal with these conflicts as a nation in a manner wherein we all take responsibility and transform our communities so that they can become accommodative and tolerant* (Respondent 8, former National Peace and Reconciliation Commissioner (NPRC)).

The process aims to transform rather than simply manage the conflict. This transformative approach recognises that conflict is not simply a problem to be solved, but also an opportunity for growth and change. Through constructive dialogue, Zimbabweans can learn from their past experiences, identify new ways of relating to each other, and create a more just and equitable society. This transformative process requires a willingness to challenge existing power structures, question deeply held beliefs, and embrace new perspectives.

Root causes of the protracted conflict

The data revealed a common diagnosis of Zimbabwe's conflict drivers: Disputed elections, securitisation of politics, economic exclusion, and corruption. These factors have contributed to a climate of political instability, social unrest, and economic hardship, undermining the country's development prospects and exacerbating existing inequalities. Disputed elections have eroded public trust in the democratic process, leading to political polarisation and violence.

Elections have been a source of problems in this country. We get scared when it's election time, to the point where you then ask whether they serve any purpose at all. I tend to agree with my colleagues at the Council of Churches who called for an electoral Sabbath, till such a time when we are sure that we really need them (Respondent 6, Faith leader).

A captured electoral management body has ensured that electoral outcomes are not credible. For instance, serving securocrats have been appointed to this body, taking a partisan approach (Respondent 5, Gender activist).

The securitisation of politics, characterised by the excessive involvement of the military and security forces in civilian affairs, has stifled dissent and undermined human rights (Respondent 4, Human rights lawyer).

The typology of the government system in Zimbabwe presents a problem, as it involves a military government masquerading as a civilian government. These people participated in the liberation struggle, got appointed into public sector jobs in the military and have a sense of entitlement. Zimbabweans deserve a civilian government where the security sector does not interfere in civil affairs (Respondent 9, ex-Movement for Democratic Change Member of Parliament).

The constitutional and regulatory framework sets the tone for how the country should be managed, and I have a problem with the current framework, which is not people-driven and, therefore, manipulated by the powers that be. For instance, we witness the judicialisation of elections, lawfare being used as a weapon against those perceived to be against the state (Respondent 10, NDWG).

Economic exclusion, with vast disparities in wealth and opportunity, has fueled social resentment and instability. Pervasive corruption has diverted public resources, undermined government institutions, and eroded public trust.

The state has been captured, and we see national resources being plundered by connected locals as well as the Chinese. It's the ordinary people who are now impoverished and angry (Respondent 7, Civil Society activist).

It is becoming increasingly difficult to run a business in the country, given the ever-changing policy framework as well as the multiple requirements to be fully licensed. On a weekly basis, one has to bribe representatives from local government or central government, and you get to a point where you even ask yourself whether it's worth it. The corruption has become too much (Respondent 2, Small to Medium Enterprise (SME) operator).

The failure to address past atrocities and injustices has left deep scars in Zimbabwean society, increasing resentment and mistrust.

The country has gone through various epochs of violent conflict, right from the pre-colonial to the post-colonial period, and these epochs remain smouldering fires to

date. As NPRC, we attempted to address some of these, and we hope that succeeding institutions mandated to do so will also act; otherwise, they perpetuate mistrust, animosity, and the effect is the polarised society we have today. There is no nation to talk about (Respondent 8, ex-NPRC Commissioner).

Polarised information ecosystems, characterised by the spread of misinformation and hate speech, have further divided society and undermined constructive dialogue.

The media in this country is captured. The state media is pro-government, with the private media being pro-opposition. What we then see is this competition to mud smear each other through propaganda and hate speech (Respondent 7, Civil society activist).

We witness a lot of hate speech in the country, with women bearing much of the brunt. At the same time, civic space is shrinking, which makes it difficult for us to express our views as we fear prosecution (Respondent 5, Gender activist).

These issues create a toxic environment that makes it difficult to build trust, nurture reconciliation, and promote peaceful coexistence. Zimbabwe's largely man-made crises are cyclical because structural sources of conflict remain unaddressed. Zimbabwe's recurrent crises are not simply isolated events, but rather symptoms of deeper structural problems that need to be addressed in order to achieve lasting peace and stability. These structural problems, as exemplified above, include political exclusion, economic inequality, social division, and weak governance institutions.

Inclusion and stakeholder legitimacy

A recurring theme was the importance of inclusivity. Respondents emphasized that without the participation of ruling and opposition parties, the security sector, independent commissions, civil society, the business community, the diaspora, and regional guarantors, dialogue would lack legitimacy. This underscores the need for a broad range of voices to be heard throughout the process. Inclusive approaches enhance both the legitimacy and sustainability of peace settlements, fostering a sense of ownership and commitment among all stakeholders.

Including diverse perspectives ensures that the dialogue addresses the needs and concerns of all segments of society. It also promotes a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges facing Zimbabwe and helps build consensus around solutions. The participation of regional guarantors adds credibility to the process and provides leverage to ensure that agreements are implemented, as discussed in later sections.

As l indicated in my conceptualisation of national dialogue, the process must be inclusive. Previous efforts, such as Internal Settlement during colonialism, failed exactly because of their exclusive nature. The same can be said about that pseudo

dialogue they called POLAD. That's why no one talks of it now (Respondent 1, peace and conflict scholar).

All stakeholder inclusion enhances legitimacy by ensuring negotiations speak to the entire population. Marginalised groups, civil society, traditional leaders, and opposition voices must be meaningfully included to ensure that the dialogue reflects the needs and aspirations of all Zimbabweans. The South African CODESA experience shows the positive effects of broad-based inclusion on the durability of agreements.

> *I have noticed that women are not included in these talks, and I find that problematic. At Lancaster, women were excluded. Even during the GNU talks, we were excluded. It is important to include women in dialogue processes because* women and children are the most affected by the conflicts we have seen in this country (Respondent 5, Gender activist).

> *There cannot be a national dialogue without us, yet the government is actually passing legislation to shut us out. Civil society is the space between government and the people, they need us* (Respondent 7, Civil society activist).

The active participation of civil society organisations helps to ensure that the dialogue is grounded in the realities of everyday life. It also provides a mechanism for holding political leaders accountable and for monitoring the implementation of agreements. Again, the South African experience demonstrates that civil society inclusion can lead to more durable and sustainable peace settlements.

Expected outcomes of a credible dialogue

Respondents envisioned ambitious outcomes, including electoral integrity reforms, rule of law safeguards, security sector governance, an economic governance reset, devolution, and social cohesion measures. Respondents expect national dialogue to tackle how power is contested, exercised, and alternated. This entails examining the rules, norms, and institutions that govern the distribution and exercise of power in Zimbabwe. This should involve reforming electoral laws, strengthening parliamentary oversight, promoting judicial independence, and decentralising government authority.

> *As I mentioned before, national dialogue in Zimbabwe should address the way we conduct elections. We shouldn't just go to the ballot box to fulfill a constitutional requirement, it should be a civic exercise where the voter feels their vote counts* (Respondent 7, Civil society activist).

> *This national dialogue you are talking about needs to place the safety and security of women in this country at its centre. Every time we have political violence in this country, especially during elections, women get violated, tortured, kidnapped and sometimes killed. So the process must ensure safe spaces for women* (Respondent 5, Gender activist).

> *Electoral reforms in this country are long overdue. It is my hope that national dialogue, if at all it happens, may be the best platform to address these long-standing concerns. Parliament has failed, and instead has made the terrain even more uneven. Reforms also need to extend to other areas as well, especially the security sector, which has meddled in almost all facets of government* (Respondent 4, Human rights lawyer).

National dialogue should also address socio-economic grievances alongside political settlements. This process recognises that political stability is inextricably linked to economic and social well-being. This means that the dialogue should not only focus on political reforms but also on addressing issues such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, and access to education and healthcare. As such, national dialogue can create a more inclusive and equitable society that provides opportunities for all its citizens.

> *There is so much poverty and unemployment in the country, with a lot of ripple effects, and we as pastors have to deal with the resultant mental health burden. On a frequent basis, we have to counsel people who are contemplating suicide. Divorce cases are on the increase, our young people are abusing drugs, young girls falling pregnant and getting married at very young ages. We are at a point where a discussion has to be held to deal with these issues* (Respondent 6, Faith leader).

These aspirations highlight the belief that national dialogue can serve as a platform for comprehensive governance transformation, not just elite accommodation. The emphasis on socio-economic compacts stresses the inseparability of political and economic justice in the Zimbabwean peacebuilding agenda. Institutional reforms must prioritise restoring the rule of law, depoliticising state institutions, securing property rights, and ensuring fair citizenship for all.

Safeguarding sustainability

Respondents emphasized the importance of legal entrenchment, independent secretariats, external verification, localization, and civic education as critical for the sustainability of national dialogue outcomes. These elements help ensure that the agreements are durable and have a lasting impact on society, reflecting broader calls to institutionalize peace processes and safeguard them against political backsliding.

Legal entrenchment entails incorporating the agreements reached during the dialogue into national laws and policies. Independent secretariats provide ongoing support for the implementation of these agreements. External verification ensures that the agreements are being carried out effectively. Localization involves translating the agreements into concrete actions at the local level, while civic education raises awareness of the agreements and encourages citizen participation in their implementation.

> *We have seen a situation where mediated agreements, such as the Global Political Agreement, are being implemented piecemeal for the simple reason that there was*

a very weak legal formalisation of the agreement. As such, most of its otherwise important elements were negated. If agreements around security sector reform and reconciliation had been implemented as outlined in the GPA, I am sure we wouldn't be having this discussion (Respondent 1, Peace and conflict scholar).

It would be important to have an independent implementation secretariat. This may be in the form of a cross-party board, civil society seats, technical experts, and guaranteed budget authority (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

Reforms should be embedded in law, with guaranteed budgets, to ensure that they are not easily reversed. National-level agreements should be linked to local-level ownership through ward and district dialogues, ensuring that they translate into tangible changes on the ground. This creates a sense of ownership and encourages local communities to take responsibility for implementing the agreements.

Civic education and inclusion are important and should ensure sustained outreach in all languages, again in an inclusive manner, wherein women and youth can co-chair thematic clusters (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

A hands-off approach from time-bound dialogue to permanent peace architecture is important to avoid previous challenges with commissions such as OHNRI and NPRC. We need a strengthened, permanent reconciliation/peace commission with investigative powers (Respondent 10, NWDG).

The idea is to create a system of governance that is responsive to the needs of all citizens and that promotes justice and the rule of law. This requires strengthening institutions such as the judiciary, the electoral commission, and the anti-corruption agency. It also involves promoting greater citizen participation in decision-making processes and ensuring that government officials are held accountable for their actions. The reforms should be designed to address the root causes of corruption and to promote a culture of integrity within government.

Barriers to effective national dialogue in Zimbabwe

Despite optimism, respondents anticipated significant barriers. These included deep mistrust among elites, asymmetries of power, the politicisation of state institutions, shrinking civic space, dialogue-washing, and weak guarantors. These barriers can render dialogue symbolic rather than substantive, reproducing rather than resolving conflict.

Politics has become a career of choice in Zimbabwe. We have seen elected opposition members of Parliament joining the gravy train in looting public resources, and that is one indicator of how toxic our body politic has become. ZANU-PF uses money to bribe people, so in that context, an effective dialogue may not work. Look at how POLAD turned out. Once other players noted there were cars and allowances,

there was a stampede to join the platform (Respondent 9, ex-MDC Member of Parliament).

Important players in the national dialogue process, such as state institutions and traditional leadership, are presently heavily compromised. Even we, the faith-based leaders, will tell you that we are the worst. It would take a lot of back-channel discussions and compromises to have them participate from an objective stance (Respondent 6, Faith leader).

The world is facing a lot of problems at the moment. Ramaphosa, the big brother often looked up to in the region, is having trouble in his backyard. Most countries in the region are burning; therefore, it would be difficult to get regional or international guarantors. Locally, we are all compromised and polarised (Respondent 1, Peace and conflict scholar).

I am sure you have noticed that politics in the country is now characterised by apathy, especially in the urban context. People, especially youth, boycott the polls. Even calls for protests and demonstrations are met with low turnouts. Life cycle issues demand that people are engaged in looking for opportunities to make ends meet, and have less time for politics. At the same time, people are wary of the heavy-handed response of the state to any event that is deemed political. The violence and intimidation that follow such is discouraging to citizens. I am sure you can relate to what used to happen during the constitution-making consultative process between 2010 and 2013. At the same time, civic space is now legally constricted, which complicates meaningful participation (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

The unequal distribution of power between different groups within society can make it difficult to achieve consensus and to ensure that the interests of all stakeholders are represented. Elite manipulation can undermine the legitimacy of the process and prevent it from addressing the root causes of the conflict. Addressing these power asymmetries requires an approach that includes empowering marginalised groups and promoting greater citizen participation in decision-making processes.

ZANU-PF has a sense of entitlement. They will not come to the negotiating table and cede a cubit of power unless they are under intense local and international pressure, like the 2008 scenario. Presently, we are nowhere near 2008. The post-2017 coup events demonstrate their obsession with power to the point of even wanting to mutilate deliberate constitutional bottlenecks just to extend the current president's term of office. In short, national dialogue would be on ZANU's terms (Respondent 1, Peace and conflict scholar).

The post-2017 consolidation of authoritarianism under ZANU-PF undermines democratic governance and represses opposition forces, making it difficult to create a conducive environment for dialogue. This consolidation involves the centralisation of state power and militarisation of political spaces, restricting freedom of expression and assembly.

Pervasive patronage networks stifle genuine political competition, further undermining the prospects for a truly inclusive dialogue. The consolidation of authoritarianism has created a climate of fear and repression, making it difficult for civil society organisations and opposition parties to operate freely.

The role of external actors:
Balancing support and sovereignty

Respondents highlighted the important role of external actors in Zimbabwe's dialogue processes. While external support can be beneficial, it must be carefully calibrated to avoid perceptions of imposition and affirm sovereignty. Affirming sovereignty is essential for ensuring that the dialogue is nationally owned and that its outcomes reflect the needs and aspirations of Zimbabweans. The effectiveness of international engagement depends on cooperative support forms, promoting collaboration and partnership rather than imposing external agendas.

> *There is this idea of prominent citizens, who represent a reservoir of knowledge about national life, wisdom and have a first-hand experience of national problems and very often you get these as eminent persons who have seen it all from a global perspective* (Respondent 10, NWDG)

The involvement of external actors can provide valuable resources and expertise. However, it is important to ensure that their involvement is carefully managed to avoid undermining the legitimacy of the process. External actors should work in partnership with Zimbabwean stakeholders and should respect the country's sovereignty. Their support should be aligned with the needs and priorities of the Zimbabwean people.

Support from bodies like the UN or African Union is crucial at such sensitive junctures, providing mediation, technical assistance, and financial resources. Donor coordination is important for maximising the impact of external assistance, ensuring that resources are used effectively and efficiently. However, it is important to ensure that their involvement is coordinated and that their support is aligned with the needs and priorities of the Zimbabwean people.

> *The monitoring and verification of national dialogue needs to involve the region. For instance, SADC and the AU can serve as external guarantors; proffering quarterly public scorecards and serving as independent auditors of progress* (Respondent 3, Transitional Justice expert).

The involvement of international bodies as guarantors is essential for ensuring the implementation of dialogue outcomes, providing leverage and accountability. These actors play an important role in monitoring the implementation of agreements and in holding the parties accountable for their commitments. Their role is crucial for overcoming resistance to change and for ensuring that the dialogue leads to tangible results.

Discussion:
national dialogue model for Zimbabwe

The diversity of voices advocating for national dialogue highlights the complexity and scope of the challenges facing Zimbabwe, which span political, economic, and social dimensions. The involvement of industry reflects concerns about the impact of instability on the business environment and the need for a predictable, stable policy framework. Civil society organizations contribute their expertise in human rights, governance, and social justice issues. Churches, as trusted community institutions, play a crucial role in fostering reconciliation and promoting dialogue at the grassroots level. Political actors, representing diverse ideological perspectives, recognize the need for a platform to engage in constructive discussions and find common ground on key issues. Even government-related entities acknowledged the limitations of unilateral approaches and the potential benefits of a broader, more inclusive dialogue process. Table 2 below proposes a national dialogue model suitable for Zimbabwe.

Table 2. National Dialogue framework for Zimbabwe

Step	Action	Objectives
Start	Acknowledge need for National Dialogue	Recognise the necessity of a national dialogue process to address the country's challenges.
Step 1: Assessment of preconditions & stakeholder mapping	Evaluate existing landscape; Identify and map stakeholders	Determine readiness for dialogue; map relevant stakeholders; assess power dynamics and potential obstacles, such as political repression.
Step 2: Selection of facilitators & dialogue participants	Choose impartial facilitators; Ensure diverse representation	Select experienced facilitators; include diverse perspectives, such as women and youth; establish clear ground rules.
Step 3: Defining the dialogue agenda & objectives	Develop a clear agenda; Set realistic objectives	Address the root causes of conflict; promote political stability, economic recovery, and social justice; prioritise issues like disputed elections.
Step 4: Structured dialogue sessions: Addressing root causes & key issues	Organise structured sessions; Facilitate constructive discussions	Provide a safe space for sharing perspectives; discuss political reforms, economic policies, and social reconciliation; Identify common ground.
Step 5: Negotiation & agreement on reforms	Negotiate and agree on reforms	Ensure reforms align with human rights and good governance; Develop a detailed implementation plan.
Step 6: Implementation of reforms (Institutional, Legal, Policy)	Implement agreed-upon reforms	Strengthen key institutions; Restore rule of law and secure property rights.

Step	Action	Objectives
Step 7: Monitoring & Evaluation of implementation	Establish a monitoring framework; Assess the impact of reforms	Track progress of reform implementation; Ensure transparency and participation.
Step 8: Re-evaluate dialogue framework & address disagreements	Periodically re-evaluate the framework; Maintain open communication	Address disagreements and emerging issues; Adapt to changing circumstances.
Step 9: Achieving a more inclusive, just, and democratic Society	Strive for an inclusive, just, and democratic society	Promote tolerance, respect, and reconciliation; Foster national unity.
End	Sustainable peace and development	Achieve lasting peace and promote sustainable development.

The model above aims to provide a framework for developing a more inclusive, just, and democratic society in Zimbabwe. It recognises that national dialogue is not a one-size-fits-all solution and that the specific design and implementation must be adapted to the particular circumstances of each country.

Why national dialogue may not work in Zimbabwe.
The absence of a hurting or strategic stalemate

A "hurting stalemate" is defined as a situation in which no stakeholder possesses the absolute strength to decisively defeat the other, nor are they in a state of complete collapse. This creates a mutual recognition of the futility of continued conflict and generates a powerful incentive for negotiation (Zartman, 2005). The concept is central to understanding conflict transformation, as it emphasizes the importance of a balance of power or a shared sense of vulnerability in motivating parties to engage in genuine dialogue. When all parties realize that they cannot achieve their objectives through force alone, the costs of continued conflict outweigh potential benefits, making dialogue a more attractive option (Zartman, 2001).

The 2008 Zimbabwe crisis, marked by extreme violence and economic collapse, created a strategic equilibrium that compelled ZANU-PF to negotiate the Global Political Agreement (GPA), illustrating how dialogue can emerge under conditions of stalemate (Cheeseman & Tendi, 2010). The crisis generated a sense of urgency and recognition that the country was on the brink of collapse. In contrast, the absence of a similar crisis today reduces the likelihood that ZANU-PF will engage in meaningful dialogue, as the ruling party does not perceive an immediate threat to its power and therefore has little incentive to compromise.

Current conditions in Zimbabwe do not reflect a hurting stalemate. The ruling ZANU-PF party maintains a firm grip on power, while the opposition remains fragmented and weak, undermining the prospects for genuine dialogue (Chen, 2017). The party's

dominance stems from its control of state institutions, access to resources, and ability to mobilize support through extensive patronage networks. The post-2017 consolidation of authoritarianism has further weakened democratic governance and repressed opposition forces, making meaningful dialogue even less likely (Dendere & Taodzera, 2023). This consolidation involved centralizing state power, militarizing political spaces, and enacting restrictive laws that curtail civil liberties. Pervasive patronage networks stifle political competition, reward supporters, punish opponents, and create a climate of fear, all of which undermine the conditions necessary for a truly inclusive and fair national dialogue.

The weakness and fragmentation of the opposition (by elections)

The opposition in Zimbabwe is currently in a state of disarray, characterized by fragmentation, weakness, and polarization, which significantly undermines its ability to challenge the ruling party and advocate for meaningful reforms (Moyo, 2020; Mwonzora, 2022). This disarray stems from internal divisions, leadership struggles, and the repressive tactics of the ruling party.

Internal divisions prevent the opposition from presenting a united front or articulating a coherent alternative vision for the country (Mwonzora, 2022). This lack of unity allows the ruling party to employ divide-and-conquer strategies, further weakening the opposition's capacity to contest the status quo.

The weakened opposition makes it difficult to create a conducive environment for dialogue, as the ruling party has little incentive to negotiate with a fragmented and ineffective challenger. Without a strong, united opposition, ZANU-PF can pursue its agenda with minimal resistance. Since the 2023 harmonized elections, more than 30 by-elections have been conducted, yet the main opposition has failed to field strong contenders, with ZANU-PF winning all contests.

This situation has entrenched asymmetries of power between the ruling party and the opposition, as well as among different societal groups, making it difficult to achieve consensus and represent the interests of all stakeholders. The ruling party and its allies control the state apparatus, resources, and political machinery, dominating the political process. The politicization of state institutions—such as the judiciary, police, and electoral commission—further undermines impartiality and credibility, hindering the prospects for genuine dialogue (Tofa, 2020). This perceived bias erodes public trust and challenges the fairness and transparency essential for a meaningful national dialogue.

Lack of unified leadership and a clear vision

The absence of strong, unified leadership further exacerbates the opposition's weakness, as there is no single figure capable of commanding the respect and loyalty of all opposition supporters or effectively articulating a clear, compelling vision for the country's future.

This leadership vacuum undermines the opposition's ability to mobilize support and challenge the ruling party.

The paper underscores the importance of sound leadership in national dialogues, emphasizing the need for strong, visionary leaders who can guide the process and ensure it remains focused on achieving meaningful outcomes. Successful national dialogues often require leaders who can transcend partisan interests and prioritize the national good (He, 2013; Mandikwaza, 2025). Historical examples include Robert Mugabe, Morgan Tsvangirai, and Joshua Nkomo in Zimbabwe, as well as Nelson Mandela and F. W. de Klerk in South Africa, who played pivotal roles in facilitating dialogue and political transitions. These leaders were able to inspire trust and confidence among followers while negotiating effectively with adversaries.

The current political landscape in Zimbabwe lacks such reconciliatory figures, hindering the prospects for a genuine national dialogue, as there is no individual who can command the respect and loyalty of all stakeholders or effectively steer the process toward a successful outcome.

Lukewarm internal pressure:
Low political efficacy

Zimbabwe currently faces a collective action problem. Politics in the country, particularly in urban areas, is characterized by apathy, as citizens appear to have lost faith in the political process and doubt that their participation can make a difference. This apathy stems from a combination of factors, including a history of disputed elections, a lack of accountability from political leaders, and the perception that the political system is rigged against ordinary citizens (Masunda, 2024). Citizens—especially youth, who constitute the largest demographic group—often boycott elections, and calls for protests and demonstrations see low turnouts, reflecting widespread disillusionment with the political system and skepticism about the ability of political action to bring about meaningful change (Mwonzora, 2023; Masunda, 2023). This disengagement among young people is particularly concerning, as they represent the country's future and their participation is essential for building a more democratic and prosperous society.

Life cycle and survival pressures further reduce political engagement. Many Zimbabweans are preoccupied with securing basic needs in a difficult economic environment, leaving limited time or energy for political participation. This economic hardship fosters desperation and hopelessness, discouraging active involvement in politics.

At the same time, citizens remain wary of the government's heavy-handed response to any perceived political activity. The state has a history of using violence and intimidation to suppress dissent and maintain its grip on power. Recent continual calls for protests by Blessed Geza, a veteran of the liberation struggle, have been met with general disinterest,

demonstrating widespread caution and disengagement. This repression fosters a climate of fear that inhibits free expression and political participation.

Civic space has been further constricted by legal measures such as the Maintenance of Peace and Order Act (MOPA) and the Private Voluntary Organisations (PVO) Bill, the latter imposing onerous registration requirements and granting authorities the power to suspend or deregister civil society organisations, thereby undermining their rights and operational capacity (ZimRights, 2023). This shrinking civic space coincides with pervasive human rights abuses, including arbitrary arrests, enforced disappearances, and excessive use of force against peaceful protesters, opposition members, and human rights defenders, creating an atmosphere of fear and repression (ZimRights, 2023). Political polarization compounds the problem by systematically excluding dissenting voices from exercising freedoms of assembly and expression, privileging ruling party supporters, and further deepening national divisions and mistrust.

Compounding these challenges are entrenched weaknesses in institutional independence and accountability. Key bodies, including Chapter 12 commissions—the National Peace and Reconciliation Commission, Zimbabwe Human Rights Commission, Zimbabwe Electoral Commission, Zimbabwe Anti-Corruption Commission, Zimbabwe Media Commission, and Zimbabwe Gender Commission—suffer from political interference and insufficient resources, limiting their ability to fulfill constitutional mandates and deliver justice or reconciliation (ZimRights, 2023).

The combination of political apathy, lawfare, and state repression has eroded trust and confidence in political processes, creating a vicious cycle in which citizens become increasingly disengaged and disillusioned, further weakening prospects for democratic reform. This erosion of trust is a major obstacle to achieving a successful national dialogue, as it hampers consensus-building and undermines the broad acceptance and support necessary for effective outcomes.

Consequently, it becomes difficult to mobilize citizens and generate a groundswell of support for national dialogue, as many no longer believe that dialogue can bring about meaningful change or that their participation can make a difference. Without a sense of hope and belief in the possibility of progress, inspiring citizen engagement in the political process is challenging.

Moreover, without significant internal pressure, the ruling party has little incentive to engage in genuine dialogue, as it does not face substantial public demand for reform and does not perceive a serious threat to its power. This lack of internal pressure further undermines the conditions required for a successful national dialogue process.

Lack of external pressure:
Regional and international dynamics

There is a lack of regional pressure, as fellow liberation movements in South Africa, Mozambique, and Angola remain in power and act in solidarity, making it unlikely that these countries will push ZANU-PF to engage in meaningful dialogue or implement democratic reforms. For example, the ANC in South Africa publicly supported ZANU-PF following the disputed 2023 elections. In June 2025, the ANC hosted the 2025 Liberation Movements Summit, during which the declining fortunes of the six liberation movements in government were attributed entirely to external forces, with no acknowledgment of internal factors. These regional allies often prioritize solidarity, even when concerns about human rights and democratic governance arise.

These allies are unlikely to exert significant pressure on ZANU-PF, given their shared history and ideology and their reluctance to interfere in one another's domestic affairs. This lack of regional pressure undermines the prospects for creating a conducive environment for national dialogue.

On the international stage, unilateralism appears increasingly prominent, with countries acting independently and expressing growing distrust of multilateral institutions and rules-based orders (Footer, 2022). As a result, global attention to African conflicts is limited. In Zimbabwe's case, sanctions imposed by Western countries have failed to generate the economic or political pressure necessary to compel ZANU-PF to negotiate or implement meaningful reforms, unlike their impact during the liberation struggle in the 1970s or in apartheid-era South Africa (Chakawa, 2022). In practice, these sanctions have at times emboldened ZANU-PF, providing a convenient justification for entrenching its rule and deflecting criticism by blaming sanctions for the country's economic difficulties. Sanctions have also been criticized for harming ordinary citizens while failing to target those most responsible for the country's problems.

The limited effectiveness of sanctions reduces the leverage of external actors in promoting national dialogue, as the ruling party does not feel compelled to respond to international pressure and perceives little threat to its hold on power. This makes it increasingly difficult for external actors to influence Zimbabwe's political dynamics.

Conclusion

This paper examined national dialogue as a pathway out of Zimbabwe's protracted conflict. The evidence presented demonstrates that dialogue remains an attractive proposition across political, civil society, and faith-based constituencies, largely because it is perceived as the only mechanism capable of addressing the intertwined crises of electoral legitimacy, security sector politicization, corruption, and economic exclusion. Respondents articulated a vision of dialogue not as a narrow elite pact but as a transformative, inclusive, and nationally owned process capable of reconstituting Zimbabwe's fractured political settlement.

The analysis also highlights the risks and obstacles accompanying dialogue efforts. Trust deficits, entrenched power asymmetries, authoritarian resilience, and a lack of credible guarantors create conditions under which dialogue may be manipulated to consolidate, rather than dismantle, authoritarian dominance. Lessons from Zimbabwe's past dialogues—namely the Internal Settlement, Lancaster House Agreement, the Global Political Agreement (GPA), COPAC, and POLAD—demonstrate that the success of any such process depends less on the signing of agreements than on their enforcement, institutionalization, and broad-based legitimacy.

For dialogue to move beyond symbolism, it must be anchored in context-sensitive design. This includes clear legal entrenchment of outcomes, independent secretariats to guard against partisan capture, robust civic education to expand citizen ownership, and the involvement of credible regional guarantors to ensure compliance. Without such safeguards, dialogue risks degenerating into another episode of "dialogue-washing" that defers rather than resolves Zimbabwe's governance crisis.

In conclusion, national dialogue is neither a guaranteed panacea nor an exercise to be dismissed. It is a contested tool whose outcomes depend on the balance of forces, the credibility of facilitation, and the extent to which it responds to both elite and popular demands. Properly structured, it could catalyze structural reform and democratic renewal; poorly designed, it risks entrenching the very authoritarian practices it seeks to overcome.

Acknowledgements

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