

STATEMENT ON THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE TO CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANS FROM THE NATIONAL FOUNDATIONS

08 August 2025

Background and Purpose

On 27 June 2024, several National Foundations called for a National Dialogue, responding to South Africa's political and socio-economic crisis – rooted in poor leadership, economic stagnation, unemployment, and governance failure. Over 900 organisations across 30 sectors have since expressed interest in the process. The National Dialogue is intended to recalibrate our Constitutional Democracy by facilitating inclusive, ward-level, citizen-led dialogues – not as an elite initiative, but as a broad, national engagement.

Contrary to public belief, the National Dialogue is not a single event or the First National Convention. Instead, the First Convention is a springboard: it is meant to set the agenda, define the structure, and launch the process that culminates in 13,400 local and sectoral dialogues.

Guiding Principles

There has indeed been a robust national discourse around the National Dialogue. Questions have arisen over the real intent of the process, and whether or not it is a mere political gimmick that is designed to calm a restive and agitated citizenry. In addition, concerns have been raised about the quantum of resources required to implement the dialogue, the likelihood of corrupt activity related thereto, as well as how different it will be from other processes whose resolutions or recommendations are yet to be fulfilled. These include for example the TRC, the Zondo Commission and several others. This scepticism from the citizens is not ill-founded.

This scepticism is largely borne out of a trust deficit that citizens have in political processes, parties, and officialdom. Indeed, the voter turnout in the last national government elections was as low as 39% of eligible voters – making the political mandate that prevails over our sovereignty

unrepresentative, and thus, of questionable legitimacy if we apply the democracy standard of majority rule. It is particularly poignant that even new political parties that boast an unblemished record, failed to capture the imagination of citizens in the recent elections. The people's sovereignty on the one side remains.

The answer to why citizens are abandoning our democracy is connected to the findings of the Edelman Trust Barometer Report of 2025, which surveys some 28 countries. Whilst the report recognises the spike in public confidence that was occasioned by the formation of a GNU, which has since waned, the comparative numbers are telling. Business enjoys 68% trust confidence, followed by NGOs at 63%. Media and government are the least trusted at 46% and 36%, respectively. Put differently, when government speaks, even as the GNU, citizens expect that 64% of what they are communicating is falsehoods. Sadly, this is the daily experience of most of the compatriots.

It is this uphill battle that faces initiatives like the National Dialogue, especially when the perception is created that they are government-led. But should such challenges obliterate our hope in democracy and our responsibility to uphold it? Rather than being "spectators in a game in which citizens should be players", should we not explore models that bolster substantive democracy and thereby also improve electoral democracy?

Faced with this question, the foundations have operated on the premise that democracy is too important to be left to political and government leadership alone. Indeed, the Statement of Intent of the GNU has enlisted several fundamental principles. Principle 8.7 commits the GNU to:

*"Accountability, transparency and **community participation in government.**"*

Further, one of the GNU's basic minimum priorities is enshrined in clause 11.8: *"Strengthening social cohesion, nation building and **democratic participation.**"*

Against this background, the Foundations that made the call of 27 June 2024, resolved to contribute to re-igniting public interest in our democracy by mobilising thousands of citizens to return to issues-based engagement and activism, using the National Dialogue.

Establishing the Dialogue Infrastructure

To safeguard the process:

- The Dialogue is citizen-led in structure and spirit.
- A Preparatory Task Team (PTT) was established, evolving from a civil society-led Preparatory Committee.
- The President appointed an Eminent Persons Group (EPG) to act as advisors and ambassadors.
- NEDLAC was chosen as the convening infrastructure, to host a Secretariat (“NEDLAC Plus”).
- An Inter-Ministerial Committee (IMC) was envisioned to coordinate government participation and resolve community issues arising from dialogues.
- Funding was planned as a 60% public, 40% private sector hybrid, with NEDLAC and Solidarity Fund handling public and private contributions respectively, ensuring PFMA and IFRS compliance and credibility.

Current Challenges and Non-Compliance Risks

Despite clear structures, the lack of funding to NEDLAC has undermined the state of readiness to deliver the first National Convention, from the perspective of capacity as well as compliance with PFMA regulations. Funding was only received by NEDLAC on Tuesday, the 5th of August, a mere 7 working days before the date of the event.

Concerns include:

- 1. Lack of Budget Availability:** Delayed budget confirmation renders procurement timelines non-compliant with PFMA requirements.
- 2. Emergency Workarounds:** Attempts to pivot processes to the departments within government or UNISA face the same legality concerns in terms of the PFMA, as neither are exempt from the PFMA. Attempts by the Foundations to gain assurance on matters of compliance have been met with evasive and vague responses.
- 3. Loss of Operational Independence:** Government is effectively running operations due to NEDLAC’s incapacitation.

Governance and Cohesion Issues

A citizen-led process: The PTT is at odds over the principle and practice of a citizen-led process, and in particular the role of government in the day-to-day running of processes.

Since the establishment of the PTT in April, its largest component is government employees. This is the same in some of the Sub-Committees. This is a variance from the statement of the Head of State that: *“While the Head of State has a Constitutional mandate to convene the National Dialogue, and while the government should use its capacity and resources to support and facilitate this process, the National Dialogue is neither government driven or directed.”*

This begs the question – is the National Dialogue still citizen-led?

Parallel Structures: Parallel planning and implementation structures independent of the PTT or Sub-Committees, established without its mandate or oversight, have been created inside government.

State of Readiness for the 1st National Convention: The PTT is divided on the state of readiness, with the Foundations steadfast in our belief that it cannot deliver the qualitative and substantive 1st National Convention that is needed to kick-off the National Dialogue in a matter of weeks or days. This has led to the presentation of separate and conflicting reports in meetings.

Dilution of Programming Quality: Substantive changes to the agenda of the 1st National Convention have been proposed to cover for the fact that the planning has been hampered by a lack of funds and capacity.

Postponement Recommendation

At the EPG’s inauguration on the 11th of July 2025, the PTT flagged funding delays and procurement issues as a major risk. These matters have been raised consistently to the EPG and within PTT meetings since then. These concerns have now materialised.

On the basis of the above risks, we respectfully advised the Head of State, via a letter sent on 30

July 2025, that it was our view that it would be in the best interest of the National Dialogue that:

“The proposed date of the First National Convention of the 15th August 2025, be deferred to a later date. In terms of designed plan, all things being equal, we believe a date on or after 15th October 2025 will best enable sounder preparations, enabling a successful and seamless National Convention, to be followed immediately with the District and Sectoral Dialogues, to sustain the energy from a successful National Convention.”

Summary of Key Concerns

1. We believe that there is no legal route to deliver a compliant First Convention by 15 August due to PFMA constraints, and we have not received any substantive assurance to the contrary.
2. Unpreparedness due to lack of funding and the limited capacity within the PTT, Sub-Committees and NEDLAC.
3. Government dominance of day-to-day activities is contrary to citizen-led principles.
4. Fundamental and incompatible differences of opinion with the PTT related to the above issues and the state of readiness for the First National Convention.

Outcomes of the 5 August 2025 Facilitated Meeting at NEDLAC

In order to overcome the fundamental and incompatible differences of opinion within the PTT, a decision was made to hold a meeting under the guidance of an independent facilitator on Tuesday, the 5th of August 2025. With the assistance of the facilitator, the meeting considered options available being:

- Going through with the 1st National Convention with a PTT divided in the middle and the Foundations component potentially pulling out;
- Agreeing to forge ahead collectively in the face of glaring difficulties and shortcomings; or
- To package a proposal to the Head of State to give the PTT more time to plan for the 1st National Convention.

After much deliberation, the meeting, attended by members from Foundations, government and NEDLAC representatives, agreed that more time is required, and that postponement is unavoidable.

Despite what is recorded as a united decision by the PTT on the way forward at this meeting, the next day it became clear that there were two differing versions of what was agreed at this meeting.

Subsequent delegations to the EPG and Head of State

Subsequent to this, on Thursday, the 7th of August, delegates from the PTT held a meeting with the EPG wherein the differing perspectives of the state of readiness were presented.

Immediately following this, the delegates of the PTT held a meeting with the Head of State, wherein again, the two differing views of the state of readiness were presented. Having heard the two views, the Head of State advised that his view was that any postponement would damage the reputation of the National Dialogue, potentially catastrophically and therefore, the 1st National Convention must proceed on the 15th of August 2025.

The Foundations thereafter advised the President, that, despite our steadfast belief in the need for a transformative National Dialogue, we could not, holding to our understanding of the principles, continue to participate in the planning or activities necessary for the 1st National Convention. We, therefore, proffered that it be better for the Foundations to stand down from the structures planning for the 1st National Convention and allow the remaining members to proceed.

Conclusion

The National Dialogue is a generational opportunity to reconnect people of South Africa to each other and to the democratic project, but we cannot pursue that goal by cutting corners, centralising power, or rushing the process.

We, therefore, withdraw from the current Convention plans, as they currently stand, in order to protect the long-term credibility and integrity of the Dialogue. Our commitment to this country and its people remains undiminished and unwavering.

Issued on behalf of:

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