

National Dialogue Event | “Our Heritage, Our Dialogue”



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UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
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About the CMA

The goal of the CMA is to help make mediation efforts throughout Africa more effective. We do so by offering academic and practical courses in mediation, researching new and current best practices, and supporting organisations and governments involved in mediation processes.

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REPORT ON THE NATIONAL DIALOGUE EVENT- *compiled by Tshegofatso Chauke*

Introduction

The Centre for Mediation in Africa (CMA), based in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria, in partnership with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, hosted the event *Dialogue: Our Heritage, Our Dialogue* on 17 September at the Javett Art Centre, University of Pretoria. This event is part of the CMA's broader effort to contribute to South Africa's National Dialogue process, an initiative aimed at rebuilding trust, addressing the country's most pressing challenges, and shaping a shared future. The event focused on enhancing inclusivity by ensuring that grassroots and marginalised communities, including traditional leaders, youth, and women, have a meaningful role in shaping and contributing to the process. Discussions also explored the meaning of dialogue, its purpose within the National Dialogue, and how traditional leadership engages in dialogue. Being situated in Heritage Month, the focus on ways to integrate traditional values and practices into the national process was apt.

In her opening remarks, Prof. Cori Wielenga, Director of the CMA, reflected: "Heritage is about drawing from South Africa's vast traditions, oral histories, and knowledge systems to form an identity and shape our shared future." She further emphasised that dialogue is not merely discussion or debate but a distinct form of action capable of driving meaningful change. Prof. Cori highlighted the meaning of dialogue, its potential to challenge existing power structures, and its role in facilitating transformation. She also focused on how to create an inclusive dialogue that genuinely involves grassroots actors, including community members and traditional leaders. A key point raised was that traditional leaders have often been excluded from transformation processes, and efforts should be made by the National Dialogue Secretariat to ensure their inclusion.

A heartfelt tribute was also paid to the late Professor Maxi Schoeman, whose vision, dedication, and unwavering commitment were instrumental in shaping the Centre's growth and focus. Her legacy continues to inspire the CMA, reflecting the values of compassion, inclusivity, and intellectual excellence that she championed throughout her career.

The panel brought together a range of voices, including:

- Mr Roelf Meyer – Director at In Transformation Initiative
- Dr Edknowledge Mandikwaza – Centre for Mediation in Africa, University of Pretoria
- Queen Mabhena – Ndebele Kingdom
- Nkosi Joyi – Senior Leader of the Bhaziya Traditional Council
- Nkosi (kazi) Ngonyama – Regent Senior Traditional Leader, Cacadu Traditional Authority

The audience included representatives from the German Cooperative and Raiffeisen Confederation, members of the European Union delegation to South Africa, and various stakeholders from within the University of Pretoria.

Against this background, the report is structured as follows: the introduction outlined above, followed by a section highlighting the key themes and points raised by panellists and participants. Then, concluding with a summary of the main findings, this section synthesises the insights, key observations, and recommended actions from the event.

Perspectives and Key Themes from the Event

Mr Roelf Meyer's opening remarks reflected on the significance of the National Dialogue as South Africa approaches 30 years since the adoption of its democratic Constitution. While the Constitution marked a historic achievement through broad-based public participation, many South Africans feel that its aspirations, particularly those captured in the Bill of Rights, have not been fully realised. Participants noted that promises made by political leaders often remain unfulfilled, reinforcing public mistrust and fuelling scepticism about government-led processes.

Against this backdrop, the National Dialogue was framed as an essential opportunity for South Africans to reflect on both achievements and shortcomings of the past three decades. Meyer stressed that the Dialogue must be citizen-led and bottom-up rather than driven by government or political elites. Genuine inclusivity requires the active involvement of rural communities, traditional leaders, women, and youth, who

have often been sidelined from national transformation processes. Their participation is fundamental to ensuring the Dialogue's legitimacy and long-term impact.

A central theme was the need to develop a social compact, understood as a shared agreement between government, political parties, civil society, business, labour, and local communities. Such a compact could serve as a unifying vision for the country's future. For it to be credible, it must:

- Articulate clear and tangible objectives that respond to citizens' pressing concerns
- Be accompanied by measurable indicators so that progress can be monitored and accountability ensured
- Foster genuine social cohesion by addressing longstanding divisions across communities

Meyer cautioned that without these elements, the Dialogue risks replicating the shortcomings of the National Development Plan (NDP). Although the NDP was widely recognised as a constructive policy framework, its ambitions were undermined by weak implementation and the absence of measurable outcomes. The National Dialogue must therefore learn from this experience by grounding its outcomes in concrete, actionable commitments that communities themselves can track.

In essence, Meyer emphasised that the National Dialogue is not simply another consultative exercise, but a transformative process through which South Africans can reclaim ownership of their future, rebuild trust, and lay the foundations for a renewed social contract.

Roelf Meyer's reflection emphasised that national dialogue is not a rigid or prescribed process but rather one that must take place across all levels of society. He explained that dialogue should occur within communities, districts, religious groups, educational institutions, and other sectors, with each finding its own way of contributing. The crucial point, he argued, is that the process must deliver a joint outcome that reflects collective participation. Meyer underlined that everyone, from individuals and groups to the media and wider communities, has a responsibility to

be actively engaged. He further appealed to young people, noting that those who were not part of drafting the Constitution three decades ago now have a historic

opportunity to participate meaningfully in shaping the future through the national dialogue.

Dr Edknowledge Mandikwaza, a member of the Centre for Mediation in Africa with a research focus on national dialogues, defined a national dialogue as a formal process established with the objective of addressing political, social, or economic crises within a country. He stressed that a national dialogue is not a consultation, a debate, or a legal process in essence, but rather a social and political process designed to create consensus. The aim, he explained, is not to determine whose ideas are better but to bring together people, government, and political actors to collectively shape a shared vision for the country. Such processes should resonate with people at the grassroots level, decision makers, and national development initiatives alike. Mandikwaza further noted that national dialogues typically emerge under three main circumstances: in the aftermath of political crises such as disputed elections, during transitional periods such as constitutional reform or regime change, or in contexts where there is a need to reimagine governance institutions, as in the case of South Africa. In each case, the purpose is to transform conflict, guide transitions, or pursue institutional reforms.

However, he cautioned that national dialogues often face significant challenges. A lack of political will, he argued, is the most critical pitfall, since it undermines trust and prevents meaningful participation. Without trust, citizens are less likely to engage, weakening the legitimacy of the process. Adequate resources are also essential, as insufficient funding can reduce national dialogues to elite-driven exercises that fail to reach communities across the country. He also highlighted security risks, given that competing interests may contest the dialogue process, and stressed the need for robust implementation mechanisms. For Mandikwaza, the design of a national dialogue is central to its success. Legitimacy and trust, rather than formal legality, determine whether a dialogue can achieve its aims. He concluded by underscoring the importance of bridging the gap between government processes and traditional leadership, which often enjoys stronger legitimacy and trust at the grassroots level

Prof Cori reflected on the risks inherent in dialogue, noting that many people often avoid it precisely because it is risky. Dialogue brings dissonance, competing voices, and the possibility of hearing things that are uncomfortable or unwelcome. However, she emphasised that such risks are central to the value of dialogue. Drawing on South Africa's transitional period, she pointed out that the country has shown a capacity to engage in difficult conversations, even when they are contentious. She further highlighted the role of traditional councils as important spaces where such difficult conversations continue to take place on a regular basis. In these forums, communities meet monthly to debate and express differing views. Prof Cori commended traditional leaders for their openness in these spaces, recalling in particular a meeting at the Joyi traditional council where the leader allowed space for critique, negative feedback, and even potential criticism from community members. For her, this willingness to embrace discomfort and vulnerability is fundamental to the success of dialogue and to fostering trust between leaders and their communities.

Queen Mabhele reflected on the centrality of dialogue within traditional communities, noting that it is not a new practice, but a language deeply rooted in how people relate to one another. She explained that when politicians visit communities, they often speak in a language that resonates only with themselves, leaving people unheard and disconnected. For her, true dialogue begins when leaders learn to communicate in ways that their communities understand. Communities are not asking for endless debates or promises, but for real listening, visible implementation, and tangible outcomes. Speaking on behalf of those communities, she stressed that the demand is not for words but for action that addresses their basic needs and reflects their lived realities.

She observed that even within the initial phases of the National Dialogue process, anger and frustration were evident, particularly from civil society groups who felt ignored and dismissed. This, she argued, stems from a deeper crisis of listening and understanding. People at the grassroots are not passive; they are willing to work for their own development, peace, and security. However, they feel unseen and unheard by those in government. Queen Mabhele challenged participants to reflect on what being listened to truly looks like for communities, insisting that genuine dialogue must go beyond consultation to meaningful engagement.

Turning to the role of traditional values, she emphasised that customs, culture, and religion have long shaped African communities and remain vital in addressing today's challenges. Issues such as gender-based violence, she argued, require communities to look inward, to question where values may have been neglected, and to consider how traditions can be reimagined to strengthen families and protect vulnerable groups. For her, the National Dialogue should be about remembering who we are, reclaiming identity, and using African values as a foundation for social cohesion and transformation.

On the role of traditional leaders, Queen Mabhehe made it clear that they cannot be treated as symbolic or ceremonial figures. Instead, they stand ready to partner with government and civil society to build communities that are not dependent on handouts but empowered to use their own resources for sustainable development. She underscored that traditional leaders bring education, legitimacy, and deep-rooted trust within their communities, which are essential for the success of the National Dialogue. Their role, she concluded, is to help carve a path where people see themselves reflected in the process and feel ownership of the future being built.

Nkosi Joyi reflected on how community dialogue takes place within traditional structures and what can be learned from these processes. He explained that meetings are initiated through traditional leadership structures, beginning with communication from the chief to the headmen, who then notify the wider community. These gatherings are usually held at the great place or royal house, and participation is open to all members of the community. Contrary to the perception that such spaces are patriarchal, Nkosi Joyi stressed that everyone, including women, is given the opportunity to speak and express their views. Attendance is often large, with around 200 people regularly present, and despite challenges such as bad weather, people remain committed, often staying the entire day because of the importance of the discussions. Such meetings typically take place once every two months, though urgent issues may prompt additional gatherings. For Nkosi Joyi, this rhythm ensures that traditional leaders remain in touch with the heartbeat of their communities.

He emphasised that these community dialogues differ fundamentally from government consultative processes, which often take place in urban centres and involve actors already aligned with particular legislation. Rural communities,

however, are equally affected by such decisions and must be included in shaping them. The strength of community dialogues lies in the fact that people leave feeling heard, not dismissed, which reinforces trust and accountability between leaders and community members. This, he argued, is part of South Africa's heritage: a culture of grassroots participation that functions as a form of peacebuilding and mediation, even if it is not formally recognised as such.

Turning to broader challenges, Nkosi Joyi observed that South Africa's multiparty system sometimes undermines community unity. He noted instances where members of the same household were divided along party lines, illustrating how political competition can fracture social cohesion. Traditional leaders, however, continue to strive for unity within their communities, working to ensure that dialogue transcends political divides. For him, community dialogue remains a vital platform for collective expression, accountability, and the building of inclusive social cohesion.

Prof. Cori Wielenga reflected on the intersection of party politics and rural communities, highlighting the unique challenges of building a social compact across South Africa. She noted that national political dynamics are experienced differently in urban and rural areas, with rural voices often shaped by local realities that are not fully understood in cities. This raises critical questions about how to bring together South Africa's diverse population, particularly the roughly 30 percent residing in rural areas, while also considering that many urban South Africans maintain strong connections to their rural roots. Prof. Cori emphasised that the divisiveness of party politics can complicate efforts to foster social cohesion. Despite this, she argued that traditional governance systems are deeply democratic in an African context, and their structures can provide valuable insights into inclusive decision-making. The challenge lies in integrating these traditional frameworks with modern democratic practices, ensuring that all parts of South African identity, rural and urban, traditional and contemporary, are represented and heard. She underscored that this integration is essential for constructing a social compact that is genuinely inclusive, participatory, and reflective of the nation's diverse communities.

Nkosi Ngonyama reflected on the critical role of rural communities and traditional leaders in the National Dialogue. He noted that the initial launch of the process overlooked the diversity and geographic spread of rural villages, which required

tailored approaches to ensure meaningful participation. He emphasised that rural dialogue relies on a well-established bottom-up system, beginning with sub-headmen and headmen, moving through senior traditional leaders, kings, and queens, and ultimately converging at the great place, the community's central meeting area. This structure allows communities to engage collectively, share perspectives, and provide guidance on local challenges while maintaining social cohesion.

Nkosi Ngonyama highlighted that this system enables rapid mobilisation in response to urgent events. He provided an example where a village convened a meeting within 24 hours following a violent incident, allowing community members to discuss the situation, coordinate responses, and restore order. The process demonstrates the effectiveness of traditional leadership in conflict management, decision-making, and maintaining peace at the grassroots level.

He also emphasised the importance of trust in facilitating dialogue. Leaders chosen to conduct these discussions must be trusted figures within the community to ensure participation is open, honest, and productive. Without trust, dialogue risks failure or superficial engagement.

Finally, Nkosi Ngonyama reflected on the broader implications for the National Dialogue, noting that traditional leadership networks have the capacity to mobilise millions of South Africans efficiently. He suggested leveraging these existing structures, alongside other community and religious networks, to ensure the National Dialogue is inclusive, representative, and able to reach rural and peri-urban areas that are often excluded from national processes. This approach, he argued, could strengthen social cohesion, promote active citizenship, and ensure that the voices of rural communities are meaningfully incorporated into national decision-making.

Roelf Meyer's Reflections on the National Dialogue

Roelf Meyer reflected on the lessons learned from traditional community dialogue and provided practical guidance for the National Dialogue Secretariat. He emphasised that traditional leaders and rural communities hold established networks and mechanisms for meaningful dialogue, which urban areas often lack. These networks ensure broad participation, enable local voices to be heard, and maintain social cohesion. Meyer noted that the Secretariat should actively engage with these

communities, experience their processes firsthand, and recognise the daily practices of dialogue and mediation already in place. According to Meyer, understanding and building on these grassroots structures is essential to making the National Dialogue genuinely inclusive and participatory.

A central theme Meyer highlighted was the importance of trust. Trust does not arise automatically; it must be cultivated through sustained relationships, careful preparation, and a willingness to engage openly with participants. He observed that in South Africa's transition to democracy, successful dialogue processes relied on trust between parties, which allowed for difficult conversations and the resolution of conflict. For the National Dialogue, Meyer stressed that the facilitator or messenger must be a trusted figure, someone with credibility within the community and the capacity to convey messages effectively to all parties involved. Without such trust, dialogue risks being ignored, misinterpreted, or dismissed.

Meyer also underscored the need for a permanent monitoring mechanism. Dialogue alone is insufficient if it does not lead to tangible outcomes. He explained that without follow-up and accountability, dialogue risks becoming a series of symbolic meetings or "talk shops" that fail to produce meaningful change. Monitoring mechanisms should track progress, ensure that commitments are fulfilled, and translate discussions into measurable actions. Meyer stressed that outcomes should not be abstract or aspirational; they must be concrete, actionable, and visible to communities.

He further highlighted the value of replicating the successful practices of traditional communities across the broader National Dialogue. Rural communities, through their established hierarchies and regular engagement, demonstrate an effective bottom-up approach. These processes start at the local level, with sub-headmen and headmen engaging community members, and move upward through the hierarchy to senior traditional leaders, queens, and kings. This structure ensures that every voice is heard and contributes to consensus-building. Meyer noted that applying this model more broadly would enhance inclusivity and ensure that the National Dialogue reaches communities often overlooked by urban-centred initiatives.

Finally, Meyer reflected on the importance of participants feeling genuinely heard. He suggested simple but effective mechanisms, such as summarising and repeating

community inputs during dialogue sessions to confirm understanding and demonstrate that their concerns are being taken seriously. By actively acknowledging participants' contributions and translating them into concrete actions, the Secretariat can build trust, strengthen engagement, and create a sense of ownership among all stakeholders. Meyer concluded by emphasising that inclusivity, trust, accountability, and replication of grassroots practices are central to the success of the National Dialogue and to achieving meaningful social cohesion in South Africa.

Participants reflection

Chandra, Ndebele Kingdom

Chandra expressed significant disappointment regarding the lack of accessibility for people living with disabilities during the national dialogue process. He noted that the absence of interpreters demonstrated a lack of consideration for inclusive participation and showed that the organisers had not engaged fully with all community members. Chandra highlighted the ongoing political frustrations experienced by communities, arguing that consultations since 1994 have repeatedly failed to produce meaningful change. He emphasised that issues such as water shortages and basic service delivery remain unresolved and questioned what could make communities believe that current consultations would lead to tangible results. Chandra further stressed that the lack of political will was a major obstacle, asserting that government consistently fails to act even when solutions are proposed. He concluded that meaningful dialogue must be coupled with accountability mechanisms and concrete actions to restore trust between the government and the people, particularly youth and other vulnerable groups.

Thuto Mazwe Madibo reflected on the structural and philosophical challenges affecting South Africa's governance. He shared insights from ongoing research on a project examining the "hybrid state," which seeks to explore how South Africa can integrate traditional councils, cultural governance, and the politics of language alongside Western models of democracy. Madibo criticised the current bureaucratic system, observing that policies undergo multiple filters that often distort their original intent and leave leaders unclear about their content. He drew attention to the lessons offered by traditional leaders, particularly in effective communication and listening, emphasising that these practices should inform contemporary governance. Madibo

proposed establishing a formal institution similar to a House of Lords, where trusted and transparent traditional leaders could participate directly in decision-making. This, he argued, would restore credibility to governance, ensure that communities' voices are heard, and bridge the gap between citizens and the state.

Tsolo Tsolo expanded on the notion of geographic and social identity, explaining that a person's location often determines their political and civic identity. While individuals may be citizens in urban centres such as Pretoria, they simultaneously remain subjects in their home communities, reflecting the dual roles embedded in African cultural governance. Tsolo raised concerns about the "hybrid state" model, arguing that European-derived administrative structures often undermine traditional authorities, creating tension between formal state systems and customary governance. He highlighted the importance of young people seeing themselves represented in leadership and stressed that traditional leaders hold spiritual, historical, and administrative authority that is crucial for community cohesion. Tsolo urged the government to clarify the role of traditional authorities within national governance structures, noting that the hybrid model must either be fully adopted, properly integrated, or clearly excluded. He emphasised that effective engagement with traditional leadership is essential to maintain trust, ensure accountability, and empower communities to participate meaningfully in national development.

Prof Cori's reflection emphasised the growing recognition of the hybrid model of the state within academic and policy discussions. She noted that this concept, far from being radical or unfamiliar, is increasingly mainstream in scholarship and is especially relevant across the African continent. Prof Cori highlighted that the conventional neoliberal state model often struggles to address the realities of African governance, particularly in contexts where traditional authority and rural communities play a central role. She stressed the need to seriously explore how hybrid states can be structured, maintained, and reimaged to reflect both modern democratic principles and longstanding traditional governance systems.

Prof Cori pointed out that South Africa, with its relatively small rural population, faces unique challenges compared to countries such as Burundi, where around 90 percent of the population resides in rural areas under traditional leadership, or Nigeria, where rural populations and traditional authorities have historically exerted significant

influence. She noted that despite these examples, South Africa has yet to fully operationalise a hybrid state model that effectively integrates traditional governance with formal state structures.

She concluded by underlining the importance of considering these dynamics in discussions on the national dialogue. Understanding how to balance traditional leadership with contemporary governance structures is crucial for shaping South Africa's future as an African country. Prof Cori emphasised that this process is essential not only for national development but also for defining South Africa's identity and role within the broader African continent.

Dr Litlhare Rabele began by she highlighting several pressing issues regarding the national dialogue. One of her key concerns was the apparent disconnect between the national dialogue and ordinary citizens. She noted that even highly educated individuals, including herself as a PhD holder, often feel disconnected from these discussions, and that this disconnect is likely far more pronounced among the wider population who may not fully understand or engage with these processes. Dr Rabele emphasised the urgent need for a clear monitoring and evaluation framework to track the implementation of national dialogue outcomes. She stressed that timelines and accountability mechanisms are essential to ensure that discussions translate into concrete action, warning that without such systems, dialogue risks remaining mere rhetoric. She also highlighted the importance of trust in the facilitation of the dialogue. Drawing on the Centre for Mediation in Africa's principles, Dr Rabele argued that neutrality is critical, and that dialogue led directly by political parties, particularly under the ANC-led government, could undermine perceptions of fairness and impartiality.

Another significant point raised by Dr Rabele was the current complexity in South Africa's governance structure. She observed that decentralisation, coupled with overlapping roles between local government and traditional leadership, often creates confusion and inefficiencies. She recommended that the national dialogue develop a clear strategy to empower traditional leaders, ensuring that they are adequately resourced to fulfil their roles effectively. Furthermore, she suggested that strengthening collaboration between local government officials and traditional authorities could improve service delivery and community engagement. Dr Rabele

concluded by emphasising that these measures, trust in facilitation, robust monitoring, and strengthened relationships between governance structures, should be central on the national dialogue agenda. Such interventions would enhance the dialogue's credibility and effectiveness while supporting the broader goal of social cohesion and responsive governance in South Africa.

The speaker began by acknowledging that many people, including themselves, are often disconnected from the national dialogue. For them, this session marked the first time they genuinely felt they were listening to and engaging with the Commission's work. They emphasised that discussions often address issues long ignored by government and are not commonly raised in public debates or academic forums. This disconnect, they noted, is not only felt by well-informed individuals but even more so by ordinary citizens who may struggle to understand the mechanics of policy, governance, and community engagement.

A key concern highlighted was the question of when civic education and dialogue should begin for young people. The speaker argued that discussions about governance, leadership, social responsibility, and rights should start early, ideally in primary school, and continue throughout high school. In many rural communities, children grow up without consistent guidance or leadership at home. This gap can leave young people vulnerable to social and political disengagement, as well as to harmful traditional practices or cultural norms that may not protect them adequately. The speaker shared examples from their own community in Emma Kai, noting that basic infrastructure challenges, such as lack of electricity, still limit access to information and opportunities even in 2025.

The speaker also raised the issue of gendered power dynamics and the exposure of children and teenagers to risky situations through some traditional practices. They highlighted the need for education that equips young people with knowledge about their rights, social norms, and safety. They argued that by starting these conversations early, children can be better prepared to engage with their communities, make informed decisions, and participate meaningfully in governance and civic life.

Another important point raised was the role of traditional leaders in shaping the civic consciousness of communities. The speaker emphasised that traditional authorities

hold a unique position of trust within their communities. By using this influence responsibly, they can educate citizens about policies, governance, and civic responsibilities without promoting any particular political party. This approach could help bridge the gap between formal government structures and traditional community governance, ensuring that young people are both informed and empowered to make thoughtful decisions.

Finally, the speaker reflected on the challenge of integrating traditional and urban spaces in dialogue. Young people often straddle multiple identities, navigating both rural traditions and urban modernity, and this requires thoughtful, inclusive engagement. Dialogue that spans these spaces can nurture informed, capable citizens who understand both the historical context of their communities and the practical realities of national governance. The speaker concluded by emphasising the urgency of beginning these conversations early, fostering informed choices among youth, and leveraging the trust placed in traditional authorities to strengthen civic engagement, social cohesion, and participatory democracy across the country.

Pholosong's Reflection, DGRV

Pholosong raised concerns regarding the national dialogue in relation to a video that has been circulating of a young lady attempting to speak at the national dialogue, only to be thrown out of the venue.

The national dialogue is intended to provide a platform for community members to express the crises they face. It is meant to be a space where individuals can bring forward issues that are deeply personal and closely connected to their lives. If the dialogue is meant to allow people to share their concerns, then the organisers must be willing to listen. Community members must feel that their voices are heard, not dismissed. The process should allow for the full expression of emotions and experiences, particularly when the issues at hand directly impact their wellbeing.

Margo's Reflection, Tamia Africa

Margo reflected on South Africa's transition to democracy. She described how at that historic moment, as citizens, we made a conscious choice to hand over our agency to the state. We believed that democracy and freedom had been granted to us, and

we assumed that the government would automatically ensure that our rights and needs were protected.

The reality, however, is that freedom and democracy are not simply handed to people. They are processes that require active, ongoing participation. Democracy does not function as a static gift; it requires citizens to engage continuously, to question, to debate, and to hold institutions accountable. Too often, we have relied solely on government action, waiting for policies to be implemented, waiting for services to be delivered, and in doing so, we have abdicated our own responsibility in shaping society. True transformation depends not only on government interventions but also on the active agency of the people.

Participation in democracy means taking ownership of our collective future. It requires asking critical questions about how power is exercised, how decisions are made, and how communities are included in those decisions. For example, in many communities, citizens continue to experience marginalization or exclusion from decision-making processes. These communities are left to wait for solutions to problems such as water shortages, education, or health services, rather than being actively engaged in developing solutions themselves. The national dialogue offers an important platform to reclaim that agency, to ensure that citizens are not only heard but also understood, and that their contributions influence real policy outcomes.

We must also consider the intergenerational dimension of participation. As we discuss the national dialogue, we should reflect on what we are doing to equip the next generation to be informed and responsible citizens. Are we teaching young people how to engage with democratic processes meaningfully, or are we leaving them passive, waiting for others to make decisions for them? Democracy requires nurturing informed, thoughtful citizens who understand their rights and responsibilities, and who can advocate effectively for their communities. The responsibility to educate and empower the youth is shared across families, communities, and civic structures.

An example of active citizen participation can be seen in a recent community meeting held around the time of the national dialogue convention at Unisa. Over 200 people attended, convening in a royal hall to debate and discuss the national dialogue. This shows the power of self-mobilized, engaged citizens exercising their

democratic agency. These are not people waiting for instruction from the government; they are taking initiative to be part of shaping the nation's conversation. This kind of participation is essential if the national dialogue is to have meaningful impact.

In addition, we must recognize that agency involves more than presence; it involves constructive engagement. Citizens must not only attend forums but also contribute thoughtfully, challenge assumptions, and work collaboratively toward solutions. This is where initiatives like the Queen's Council are instructive. The Council did not wait for government approval or instruction; they took the initiative to collaborate with authorities, assert their perspectives, and participate actively in shaping policy discussions. Such models demonstrate the kind of proactive participation that strengthens democracy.

Finally, the national dialogue is an opportunity for each of us to reclaim our agency. It is a platform to ensure that voices, perspectives, and concerns that have historically been marginalized are brought into public discourse. By participating deliberately, thoughtfully, and responsibly, we contribute to shaping a democratic society that is more inclusive, responsive, and reflective of its citizens. Freedom and democracy are not just rights; they are responsibilities. We cannot hand them over entirely to government; we must engage, contribute, and ensure that transformation is a shared process between citizens and the state.

Queen Mabhena's Closing Remarks

Thank you very much, Cori. I do not usually speak much, but when I do, I want to be understood. I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to all the speakers here today. I feel that we have truly been heard, and I want to thank everyone who contributed their insights. It is not often that people listen with such attention and respect, and I appreciate that deeply. Most times, when I speak in other forums, people do not truly engage; they listen superficially or do not respond meaningfully. Today, however, I felt that our voices were acknowledged, and that respect is reciprocal.

There are, of course, many pressing issues that we must continue to address. One of the challenges we often encounter involves children without birth certificates. In my experience, someone born in Lesotho, for example, faces significant obstacles

when trying to obtain official documentation after moving into South Africa. I have a child with a South African citizen, and I have experienced firsthand the frustration and complexity of trying to secure proper certification. These are real issues that affect families and communities, and they highlight the need for government involvement to facilitate integration and ensure that all people are recognized and included.

I also want to speak about the broader perception of identity. I do not like using the term “foreigner” because it divides us unnecessarily. Ultimately, we are all one people, and distinctions based on nationality should not overshadow our shared humanity. At the same time, there must be accountability when actions or practices are harmful, but this should be approached carefully and thoughtfully. We need government engagement to address these issues in a way that is fair, inclusive, and just.

Within the Queen’s Forum, we have taken it upon ourselves to ensure that women’s voices are heard. We recognized the need to be proactive and to assert our presence in spaces where decisions are made. I have personally insisted that when I attend meetings or forums with my husband, I should contribute meaningfully rather than simply being present as a ceremonial figure. My participation must benefit the community, ensuring that the people gain from our engagement and leadership. The government needs to see, hear, and feel the presence of women who are active, informed, and committed to driving change.

I want to acknowledge the support we have received, including from the Minister and from national leadership. Within a few months, the President has recognized that the women in the Queen’s Forum are not just symbolic figures. We are a group of educated capable women who are willing and able to take concrete action to address the needs of our communities. Our initiatives, such as providing solar panels to communities without electricity, demonstrate our commitment and our capacity to solve real problems. We have acted because our people were in the dark, hungry, and thirsty, and because our livestock and resources were at risk. These are not abstract concerns; they are immediate and tangible issues that require both initiative and support.

Our message is clear: the government must engage meaningfully with us, recognize the expertise and leadership of women in traditional communities, and support initiatives that directly benefit the people. We are not here merely to represent beauty or ceremony; we are here to contribute to practical solutions, to ensure that communities thrive, and to be active participants in shaping the future of South Africa. The work we do is essential, and it deserves recognition, respect, and collaboration from all levels of government.

Nkosi Joyi's Closing Remarks

These issues highlight a very important point about communication and education. We need to begin speaking in a language that people can understand. Communities must be taught in clear terms about the Constitution, how it functions, and what these forums and engagements are designed to achieve. It is not enough to hold meetings where information is delivered in technical language or complex English that many people cannot fully comprehend. For participation to be meaningful, communities must be given sufficient time to engage, reflect, and understand the decisions being made, and the potential impact on their lives. When people grasp the purpose and the scope of these dialogues, they can contribute more effectively, and their voices can shape outcomes that are truly representative.

I want to thank you for inviting us to participate in these discussions. We prepared carefully to contribute to the matters raised today, and I must emphasize that the necessity of these engagements cannot be overstated. Communities need to be heard consistently, not only during election periods or ceremonial occasions. Too often, decisions are made, or information is communicated in ways that exclude the very people they are meant to serve. Listening to communities must be a continuous process. It is essential that their concerns are not only documented but also translated into actions and policies that address the realities of daily life.

Traditional institutions also play a critical role in bridging the gap between governance structures and communities. These institutions are trusted, culturally embedded mechanisms that ensure that governance reaches people in ways that are meaningful to them. However, too often, their authority is limited to ceremonial functions without meaningful power to influence decisions. To build a truly inclusive and effective governance system, traditional institutions must be granted clear

authority and responsibilities that allow them to act on behalf of the communities they represent. Without such recognition, these institutions risk being symbolic and the communities they serve remain marginalized.

Another urgent concern relates to the ongoing migration from rural areas to urban centres. Many people are compelled to leave their homes in search of better access to work, services, and opportunities that are scarce in rural areas. This movement places immense pressure on urban infrastructure and resources, often creating social and economic strain in cities that are ill-prepared to absorb these growing populations. At the same time, rural areas are left underdeveloped, with limited opportunities for sustainable livelihoods. This imbalance contributes to inequality and, in some cases, can lead to social unrest and conflict. This pattern is not unique to South Africa; it is a challenge that resonates across the African continent.

This issue links directly to the concept of a hybrid state, where both traditional and modern governance systems coexist. If we fail to integrate these systems effectively, the voices of rural communities remain unheard, and urban areas become overwhelmed. We must find ways to balance governance so that traditional authorities can provide guidance and leadership while modern government structures ensure resources and services are equitably distributed. By doing so, we not only strengthen governance but also promote social cohesion and sustainable development across the country.

Finally, it is crucial to acknowledge that these challenges are interconnected. Education, empowerment of traditional institutions, migration, urban pressures, and governance structures all influence one another. Addressing them requires a holistic approach where communities are continuously engaged, informed, and empowered to participate actively. Only through consistent dialogue, respect for traditional structures, and meaningful inclusion can South Africa build a governance system that is equitable, responsive, and sustainable. Communities must not only be heard but also understood, valued, and supported in shaping their own futures.

Edknowledge's Closing Remarks

I have several points I would like to raise, some of which respond to issues raised earlier. The first concerns the role of citizens in national dialogues. In many countries, civic society organizations representing diverse groups often advocate for

a citizen-led national dialogue. The idea is to remove direct government or political control from the process so that citizens can discuss issues freely. While this approach has merit, it is important to strike a balance. National dialogues must include both political actors and citizens to ensure legitimacy and effectiveness. If civil society dominates entirely, the process may become skewed or fail to be implemented meaningfully. Political actors and citizens need to come together, forming a steering committee or team that ensures the process is both recognized by formal institutions and responsive to citizens' needs.

The second point concerns decentralization and localization. It is necessary to distinguish between these two concepts. Decentralization alone can still follow a top-down approach where politicians visit communities but do not allow citizens to express themselves freely. Localization, on the other hand, ensures that dialogue takes place within communities in a space where people feel comfortable sharing grievances and concerns in their own way. This is where citizens can bring forward issues that matter most to them, which can then be channelled effectively into the broader national dialogue process. Safety within dialogue spaces is also critical. Inclusivity is important, but simply bringing people together from different social, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds does not automatically create a safe environment. Dialogue works best when participants initially meet in homogeneous groups where they feel secure. From there, issues can be aggregated into larger, more diverse forums, ensuring that participants are not intimidated or excluded.

Transparency and accountability are central to trust. Many people distrust national dialogue processes because they lack transparency. Monitoring mechanisms must be clear and visible, so participants can see that their input is being recorded, acted upon, and followed through. Political will is another key factor, but it cannot be assumed or enforced through decree. It must be cultivated, particularly by citizens themselves. Civic society organizations, unions, and community foundations play a vital role in fostering political commitment. Without this active cultivation, the process may become controlled by politicians who selectively listen without implementing meaningful action.

Managing expectations is equally important. Citizens must understand the mandate of the national dialogue and what it can realistically achieve. Some issues, for

example, are the responsibility of government agencies and may not be solvable within the dialogue framework alone. Corruption is one such area; the dialogue can raise awareness and propose solutions, but implementation requires government accountability. Citizens should focus on issues that require consensus and collective action while recognizing which areas need formal government intervention.

Finally, it is important to recognise that no country or institution is immune to challenges such as territorialism or the weakening of democratic practices. Safeguards are necessary to ensure that the intentions of the national dialogue are protected and not undermined or reversed over time. These mechanisms help preserve the integrity of the process and ensure that the dialogue leads to tangible outcomes rather than being symbolic. Conclusion, a successful national dialogue requires a delicate balance between citizen participation and political involvement, decentralization and localization, safe and inclusive spaces, transparency, accountability, and cultivated political will. By managing expectations and putting in place safeguarding mechanisms, the process can become meaningful, credible, and capable of driving real change.

Nkosi Nganyama's Closing Remarks

I would like to address a few of the issues that were raised during this dialogue, particularly regarding the institutions we lead. One of the concerns highlighted earlier was the lack of electricity and other basic services in rural areas. I want to reassure everyone that we are aware of these challenges, and while there are some voices that resist change, these are isolated incidents and do not represent the entirety of our communities. It is important that we do not generalize these challenges but rather focus on ways to support and empower communities to see that culture is not stagnant. Culture must evolve with the times, and electricity is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity, particularly for elderly people who require refrigerated medication and for other basic needs in our communities.

Another issue relates to patriarchal tendencies within our institutions. It is essential to find ways to challenge and relax these practices, allowing women to fully participate and contribute. As senior traditional leaders, we must lead by example in creating spaces where women's voices are respected and heard. This includes ensuring that

their input is considered in decision-making processes and that they have the opportunity to address community challenges effectively. Language barriers also continue to be a significant challenge. Many rural community members are unable to fully engage in discussions conducted in English. We have experienced the difficulties this creates, and we continue to advocate for translation and communication in local languages. This allows people in rural areas to express their experiences and concerns in a way that is meaningful and accessible. For example, in our early childhood development initiatives, we use local facilities such as rondavels and work with communities to ensure that educational programs are culturally appropriate and understood by local children and parents.

We have partnered with embassies and other organizations willing to support these efforts. These partnerships are helping us change the status quo in rural homes and communities, particularly in areas such as education, basic services, and community development. Our approach is practical and grounded, beginning with a thorough understanding of community needs, conducting diagnostics to identify challenges, and then implementing solutions that are sustainable and relevant. Finally, I want to acknowledge the important role of women in our communities. Marriage should not be seen as the only achievement for women. Women today are independent, capable, and able to contribute meaningfully to society. They are building their own homes and taking responsibility for their families. We must continue to recognise and support these efforts, ensuring that women have the space and resources to succeed and lead in their communities.

This dialogue is an important platform for addressing challenges at the national level, but it is also a reflection of ongoing efforts at the community level. Our responsibility as leaders is to ensure that progress continues, that culture evolves with the times, and that all voices, especially those of women and rural communities, are heard, understood, and respected. As a kind of a side dialogue and acknowledgement can tell me if this is a good idea to have sort of side dialogues but you know to talk about the changing nature of rural societies and the dynamic nature of culture.

Roelf Meyer's closing remarks

I would like to make two main points in closing. First, it is important to take note of comparative examples of national dialogue, both within Africa and internationally.

The African Union itself has provided good examples, and other governments have produced models that can be adapted and followed. These examples are useful for guiding the structure and purpose of our national dialogue. Second, involving government is essential. If government structures are excluded from the dialogue, it is unrealistic to expect meaningful results. Government must be a partner in the national dialogue process. I want to clarify that I am not a member of government, and I am not representing them. I retired from politics more than twenty-five years ago, so I am equally qualified to critique government actions. However, for the national dialogue to succeed, government participation is critical. From my perspective, the need for a national dialogue arises because many constitutional aspirations have not been fully realised. One of the shortcomings of previous processes was the absence of an implementation plan for these aspirations. It was often left to government alone to fulfil these commitments, which created frustration and unmet expectations. The national dialogue should address this by ensuring government takes responsibility, particularly for service delivery, such as water provision. If government fails to act, citizens must hold them accountable through democratic processes.

Finally, I want to stress that national dialogue is a two-way process. It is not enough to focus solely on citizen engagement. We must ask ourselves whether government is listening as well. In practice, we have seen in the Eastern Cape that bringing government actors and traditional leaders together produces remarkable results. Traditional leaders are doing incredible work in their communities, and many government officials are striving to fulfil their duties under very challenging circumstances, often with limited resources. The challenge is not only with government or citizens, but in the space between them, where government, civil society, traditional leaders, and the private sector intersect. Success depends on all these actors coming together to coordinate, communicate, and take joint responsibility. Implementation plans must also involve the private sector, as partnerships are critical to achieving tangible outcomes. I urge private sector representatives present here to take note and actively engage in supporting this process. In conclusion, the national dialogue is about collaboration, accountability, and shared responsibility. When all actors work together in this space, meaningful

progress can be made, and the aspirations of our constitution can finally begin to be realised.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The National Dialogue event hosted by the CMA highlighted a critical reflection on South Africa's democratic journey, nearly 30 years after the adoption of the Constitution. Across contributions, a clear consensus emerged: while the Constitution and the Bill of Rights established a historic framework for equality, inclusion, and social justice, many South Africans continue to experience unfulfilled promises, mistrust in government, and limited participation in decision-making. This underscores the urgent need for a citizen-led, inclusive, and accountable process that bridges the gap between government structures, traditional authorities, and communities.

A central theme throughout the event was the role of traditional leadership and rural community structures in facilitating genuine dialogue. These networks, grounded in trust, legitimacy, and regular engagement, demonstrate a robust model for bottom-up participation. Speakers emphasised that the National Dialogue must consider replicating these approaches at a national level to ensure that rural communities, youth, women, and marginalised groups are meaningfully included. Without leveraging these grassroots structures, national consultations risk remaining top-down exercises disconnected from lived realities.

Another key insight was the importance of trust, accountability, and tangible outcomes. Many participants expressed frustration with government-led consultations that fail to translate discussions into action. Experiences shared by Queen Mabhene, Nkosi Joyi, and others highlighted that dialogue is only effective when participants feel heard, contributions are acknowledged, and commitments are actively implemented. This reinforces the need for clear monitoring mechanisms, measurable indicators, and follow-up plans to ensure that dialogue does not become symbolic or performative.

The dialogue also revealed the necessity of addressing the "hybrid state" dynamics, balancing modern democratic governance with traditional and cultural systems. Integrating these systems can strengthen social cohesion, clarify leadership roles, and ensure that governance structures reflect the diverse realities of urban and rural

communities alike. Education and civic engagement, particularly for youth, were identified as essential tools to cultivate informed, active citizens capable of shaping their own futures.

Several speakers highlighted the intersection of social, economic, and infrastructural challenges, including access to basic services, gender inclusion, and rural-to-urban migration. Addressing these interconnected issues requires holistic, multi-sectoral approaches that involve government, civil society, private sector, and traditional leadership. Active citizen participation, when coupled with responsive and accountable governance, has the potential to restore trust and promote social cohesion across South Africa.

Recommendations for Action

- ❖ **Strengthen Inclusivity:** Ensure the National Dialogue actively involves rural communities, women, youth, and marginalised groups, building on existing traditional leadership networks to facilitate meaningful participation.
- ❖ **Establish Monitoring and Accountability Mechanisms:** Develop measurable indicators and follow-up structures to ensure dialogue outcomes translate into concrete actions, particularly in service delivery, infrastructure, and social development.
- ❖ **Integrate Traditional and Modern Governance:** Clarify the roles of traditional authorities within national governance structures, leveraging their legitimacy and trust to bridge gaps between citizens and government.
- ❖ **Promote Civic Education and Youth Engagement:** Begin dialogue and civic education early, equipping young people with knowledge, skills, and confidence to participate actively in governance and community decision-making.
- ❖ **Foster Multi-Stakeholder Collaboration:** Encourage active engagement among government, civil society, private sector, and community leaders to ensure shared responsibility for implementation and sustainable outcomes.

- ❖ **Prioritise Language and Communication:** Deliver dialogue in accessible, locally understood languages, ensuring participants can fully engage, reflect, and contribute to decision-making processes.
- ❖ **Replicate Grassroots Practices Nationally:** Apply the bottom-up, community-driven dialogue models demonstrated in rural areas across urban and national forums to enhance inclusivity and trust.

In conclusion, the National Dialogue presents a historic opportunity for South Africa to reaffirm its democratic values, reclaim citizen agency, and build a shared vision for the future. Its success will depend on genuine inclusivity, trust, actionable commitments, and sustained collaboration among all actors. By learning from traditional community practices, strengthening governance systems, and empowering citizens, the Dialogue can transform from a consultative exercise into a vehicle for meaningful, long-term social cohesion and national development.