

Lead, don't demobilise the nation!



By Boichoko Dithlake

Now that the dust has settled after South Africa's National Dialogue Convention held in Gauteng in August, citizens are asking, what next? 'where do we go from here?' The chairperson of the Convention Organising Committee of the National Dialogue, BOICHOKO DITLHAKÉ, shares an updated roadmap for the work ahead.



South Africa stands, not for the first time, at a defining moment in its history. For ordinary South Africans, life is lived on the edge – amidst hunger, violence, economic anguish, grinding poverty, and gross inequality. The most vulnerable are victims of appalling cruelty. The wounded are progressively becoming perpetrators, and some perpetrators are deafeningly claiming for themselves the blanket of victimhood. We are witnessing an accelerated disintegration of the nation, a rupture not only in the essence but in the very fabric of the body politic.

One of the least appreciated outcomes of 1994 was the creation of a unitary South Africa. This was not a foregone conclusion at the time. Pre-1994, many within the political landscape clung to federalist and confederalist ideas, reinventing apartheid's Bantustans. Today, identity-driven and cultural-exclusionary tales are resurging: the Cape Independence Party openly campaigns for secession; tribalist movements stir discontent in some provinces; while exclusionary ethnic-nationalist pomposity gains traction.

The latent potential for this disintegration to feed nationalist and tribalist predispositions must be challenged. To disregard them is hazardous. The catastrophe of the Balkans or the long civil wars of Angola and Cameroon remind us of what happens when national dialogue is abandoned.

Why dialogue, and why now?

It is common in peacebuilding to say that those who most resist conversation are those who most need it. South Africa's transition was only possible when deep-rooted enemies agreed to dialogue. Today, dialogue is not discretionary – it is existential.

For more than a decade, South Africans have called for an "Economic Codesa,"¹ recognising that while 1994 secured political self-determination, economic transformation never followed. The Convention held on 15 August 2025, precisely 40 years after P.W. Botha's failed Rubicon speech,² was therefore more than representative. It was a Rubicon moment for a nation probing for regeneration.

The outcomes of the National Dialogue Convention

The National Dialogue Convention did not resolve every oxymoron, but it delivered something South Africa urgently needed: a roadmap out of paralysis. Key outcomes included:

- **Adoption of a national roadmap:** A phased plan for building a social compact over seven to eight months, beginning with thematic dialogues on economic justice, governance reform, safety and security, and social cohesion, among others.



- **Establishment of a national steering committee (NSC):** With a 60% civil society composition, the NSC will coordinate community ward and sectoral dialogues and report back to the nation. Communication to all sectors have been transmitted in this regard.

- **Commitment to a people's compact:** The convention resolved that the final outcome of the process will be an implementable national social compact and plan of action, to be ratified by a people's assembly during the second National Convention in 2026.

- **Transparency and accountability mechanisms:** Convention delegates insisted that all reports, budgets, and progress updates will be published regularly to ensure transparency and accountability, guaranteeing a citizen-led national dialogue process.

As one community leader from Alexandra said during a plenary discussion:

"We cannot eat promises. If this Dialogue does not put bread on the table, safety in our streets, and dignity in our homes, then it is nothing more than a talk shop. But today, at least, we have forced them to hear us."

Ordinary South Africans speak

Beyond resolutions, the Convention was powerful because ordinary South Africans spoke truth to power. A young activist from Khayelitsha reminded the plenary:

"We didn't come here to be consulted. We came here to co-create. This is our future, not their boardroom."

From a Limpopo farmer:

"Land reform has been debated for 30 years. Dialogue must not mean more delay. If we cannot feed our people, there is no nation to save."

From a Soweto grandmother who runs a community kitchen:

"We are already doing the work of rebuilding South Africa with our bare hands. The Dialogue must not silence us. It must amplify us."

These voices underscore the central truth: the National Dialogue cannot be the government's performance; it must be the people's process.

The road ahead: from convention to compact

The adopted roadmap charts a path that is ambitious but achievable if grounded in people's power:

1.2025–2026: Village, ward, provincial and sectoral dialogues (youth, women, workers, traditional leaders, faith communities, business, and rural constituencies, among others).



2. **Mid-2026:** Consolidation into a draft social compact.

3. **2026:** Ratification by the second national convention, creating South Africa's new social contract.

The roadmap is not perfect, but it is alive. It can, and must, be owned by the nation.

Answering the critics

Sceptics argue that the dialogue is “elite theatre” or “government’s PR stunt.” These concerns are not unfounded. But as Martin Luther King Jr. said: “There can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.” Disappointment is proof of our investment in the nation.

Civil society’s task is not to abandon the dialogue, but to hold it accountable. If elites attempt to derail, dilute, or delay, then communities must insist on progress. We cannot repeat Botha’s Rubicon failure.

From disappointment to determination

South Africa cannot wait for perfect conditions. Our democracy is wounded, but not beyond repair. The National Dialogue is flawed, yes, but also filled with possibilities.

As Oliver Tambo reminded us: “The way we lead must have a mobilising effect, not a demobilising one.” We must move forward – with or without those who hesitate. The National Dialogue is not an event but a process; not a performance but a project of national renewal.

This is our Rubicon. Let us cross it, together.

Updated roadmap for work ahead

Immediate (Aug 2025)

- *Constitution of steering committee (within 2 weeks): integrate new sectors, finalise coordination structure.*
- *Call to action: delegates mobilise constituencies, encourage registration for local dialogues.*

Phase 1: citizen-initiated and pilot dialogues (Aug–Dec 2025)

- *Launch – 50,000 citizen-initiated dialogues nationally.*
- *Roll out dialogues in 15 pilot districts (metro, town, rural).*
- *Dialogues to reach rural villages to ensure full coverage.*
- *Recruit/train provincial and ward facilitators using train-the-trainer model.*

Phase 2: ward & village dialogues nationwide (Jan–Mar 2026)

- *Expansion to all 4,300 wards, minimum three dialogues per ward, with multiple village dialogues in rural wards.*



- Continuous citizen-led dialogues supported by National Dialogue app, radio, WhatsApp forums, and local media.

Phase 3: Consolidation and cross-cutting dialogues (Apr 2026)

- Community action plans drafted from ward and village dialogues.
- District-level consolidation forums validate outcomes.
- Sectoral and thematic dialogues (labour, faith, youth, disability, LGBTQIA+, etc.) to synthesise cross-cutting issues.

Phase 4: National synthesis (Apr–Jun 2026)

- Interdisciplinary citizen panels compile draft people's compact.
- Public review period allows for amendments and transparency.

Second National Convention (June 2026)

- Adoption of the people's compact – binding commitments for citizens, sectors, business, labour, government, and civil society.
- Agreement on institutional mechanisms for accountability and monitoring.

ENDNOTES

¹ CODESA, the Convention for a Democratic Society, 1991-1993, was a series of multi-party negotiations to establish a new, democratic constitution for SA (ed).

² So called because former president PW Botha said in the speech "I believe that we are today crossing the Rubicon," a reference to Julius Caesar's 'no turning back' declaration when he crossed the river Rubicon (the frontier between Gaul and Italy) with his troops in 49 BCE. The speech, made on 15 August 1985, had been expected to confront the clear need for meaningful change in South Africa's apartheid system. On the contrary, Botha said there would be no change (ed).

BIOGRAPHY

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