



The Grand National Dialogue and the Oslo consultations:

creating a peace agenda

Enrique Alvarez

During the late 1980s, Guatemalans representing a diverse range of interests and perspectives were convened in several processes to discuss the causes of the war and identify strategies for transforming it. Although these processes did not lead to a definitive settlement, they mobilized public involvement in peacemaking, set out a range of complex issues to be addressed in bringing a negotiated end to the war and helped to create public support for negotiations between the government and the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG). The Grand National Dialogue and the series of meetings known as the 'Oslo consultations' between representatives of specific social sectors with the URNG together played a vital role in shaping the pre-negotiation phase of the Guatemalan peace process and set a benchmark for later participation in drafting the peace accords.

Commission for National Reconciliation

In August 1987, Central American presidents at the Esquipulas II meeting agreed to the 'Procedure for the Establishment of a Firm and Lasting Peace in Central America' that included provisions to end support for irregular military forces; a ceasefire and amnesty for insurgent groups; national dialogue to promote peace and democratization; and a National Reconciliation Commission (CNR) to verify implementation of the accords. In September and October, the newly-elected government of President Cerezo moved to implement the agreement. For the first time, the government engaged in direct talks with the URNG in Madrid but the meeting was inconclusive. The government and military maintained that the agreement specified dialogue only after armed groups laid down their arms, which the URNG refused to do. It instead demanded a purge of the army and the creation of demilitarized zones as its condition for negotiations.

Cerezo also convened the Guatemalan CNR. It comprised two government delegates, including the Vice-President; two representatives of the eleven legal political parties, including future president Jorge Serrano; two prominent citizens; and Bishop Rodolfo Quezada Toruño from the Guatemalan Bishop's Conference. Bishop Quezada became the President of the CNR.

The Esquipulas process had the effect of catalysing the Catholic Church to take a proactive role in promoting peace and addressing underlying structural problems. It called for a national dialogue on the war, which Bishop Quezada took up by persuading the CNR to develop a mechanism to enable it. His efforts were complemented by diplomatic pressure from neighbouring governments, who urged Guatemala to comply with the commitments to national dialogue made at the summit. Although Quezada initially advocated greater government participation, in Guatemala's deeply polarized society the

diversity of representatives provided a degree of independence that helped increase the effectiveness of the CNR. Nevertheless, the CNR worked closely with the government to design and implement the Grand National Dialogue (GND), which became a reality within the year.

The Grand National Dialogue

On 1 March 1989, the CNR inaugurated the GND with representatives from various political, social and economic sectors in Guatemalan society. The aim was to identify and promote consensus on the major topics of concern to peacemaking. In contrast to later mechanisms, the GND was not structured as sectoral dialogue because the sectors as such were not yet organized. Yet the process involved a diverse social mix, with 84 delegates representing 47 organizations as participants. There were full delegations from: the government; political parties; media organizations; churches; refugee groups; cooperatives; the Unity of Popular and Labour Action; the Council of Labour Unity; the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission; the University Student Association; the Worker/Owner Solidarity Movement; the Federation of Small Businessmen and Producers; the Education Federations; and the National University of San Carlos.

Several key sectors were absent. The government refused to allow URNG participation until it decommissioned, although Bishop Quezada agreed to read URNG documents into the official record. The formerly exiled political opposition associated with the URNG was only allowed limited involvement based on a 'voice but no vote'. At the other end of the political spectrum, the GND was boycotted by the military and several right-wing political parties as well as the Coordinating Committee of Farming, Commercial and Financial Associations (CACIF) and the National Farming and Ranching Union (UNAGRO), who together represented the interests of large businesses and landowners. They claimed that the GND was unrepresentative and would be susceptible to manipulation. Others were concerned that the exclusion of the URNG and its political allies indicated that the government wanted the GND to be only a 'cosmetic dialogue' with strict limits on the issues addressed and the breadth of participation. They saw it as a forum to help legitimize the Christian Democratic government of President Cerezo and his policy of active neutrality in order to end Guatemala's international isolation. Furthermore, it is notable that neither women's nor Mayan organizations were represented, in part because a history of discrimination and exclusion meant their voices and organizations were not widely acknowledged by those with established authority.

The participating organizations identified the issues they wanted discussed. Out of a large initial list, fifteen topics

were accepted and classified into four main areas: (1) support and reinforcement of the democratic system; (2) organization and participation of citizens; (3) quality of life; and (4) economic policies. Representatives of the participating organizations made proposals on the topics they considered a priority, which were then discussed in plenary session by delegates from all the participating groups. Bishop Quezada led this process on behalf of the CNR, which supported him throughout.

It was anticipated that the process would be structured with an opening and a closing plenary session – at an undetermined future date – but most of the actual dialogue would take place in fifteen working commissions, each of which was mandated to address a specific agenda issue and to prepare written proposals. After the opening plenary, progress was slow. By late April, none of the working commissions were functioning and several of the participating groups had not appointed their representatives. Gradually, however, they formed and began to present their papers to be debated.

The diversity of themes addressed in the GND reflected the different interests of those represented and their expectations regarding strategies to end the war. A common thread that emerged from the discussions was shared concern about the continued militarization of the country, despite the civilian government. It was the first time in decades that Guatemala's underlying structural problems were discussed in public and therefore posed considerable safety risks. Without basic personal security guarantees, there were constraints on the openness of the dialogue. Bishop Quezada tried to offset this threat through private meetings with influential figures. Yet neither the government nor even the military had complete control over the forces opposing change in the country, who had their own operating dynamics and determination to pursue their own agendas.

The working commission on human rights presented a set of proposals that included the abolition of the paramilitary Civil Defence Patrols and the resolution of land problems of Guatemalan refugees. The proposals attracted considerable opposition. Soon after, numerous participants from popular sectors and opposition groups began to receive death threats. The reluctance within the GND to discuss continuing human rights violations against its delegations began to undermine the effectiveness and legitimacy of the process. In June 1989, nine of the university student leaders were detained by the security forces, one of whom – Ivan Gonzalez – never appeared again. Thereafter a number of other GND members were kidnapped and tortured. With security deteriorating rapidly, in October the CNR decided to disband the GND, leaving the process unfinished.

The GND nevertheless had a number of important outcomes. It was the first time that the problems

generating armed conflict were discussed openly in the public arena. Although it did not result in conclusive outcomes, the analysis was vitally important several years later when it helped to define the official negotiating agenda between the URNG and the government. Furthermore, it set the stage for the involvement of the public and transformed the closed characteristics of the negotiations. The demands for political negotiation stopped being the exclusive concern of the parties directly involved in the conflict, who started to realize that a solution to the armed confrontation had to involve civil society. The social participation that the GND enabled decreased the perception of the conflict as a purely military issue and gave it a political nature. It was a powerful impetus for the URNG and the army to end their manipulation of the peace process as part of their war strategies. Furthermore, the dynamic of discussing and negotiating proposals was highly significant given Guatemala's authoritarian political traditions. It helped to stimulate the beginnings of democratic culture. The safety issues that constrained the GND – and ultimately led to its closure – were eventually addressed in the 1994 human rights accord that mandated a UN human rights mission. This became a key factor in helping to decrease the levels of repressive violence to enable a climate for civil society involvement in peacemaking.

The GND was also a turning point for Guatemala's religious organizations in the peace process. With the exception of some of the new fundamentalist evangelical groups, they found a common voice and became an integrated sector so that their perspectives would have greater recognition and authority. The GND also supported the re-emergence of the popular movement that had been severely weakened by the murder, disappearance and exile of its leaders during the war. In general, throughout the GND, representatives of political parties displayed a greater capacity to participate in discussions and to elaborate proposals. However the GND provided important skills-building experience for participants from diverse social organizations who were better prepared to participate effectively when the Civil Society Assembly was later formed. As a consequence, organized Guatemalan society changed from being a spectator to being an active force in the peace process.

The Oslo Accord

Despite these developments in the role of civil society in peacemaking, the late 1980s witnessed a virtual stalemate in the talks between the government and the URNG – each of whom continued to insist that their preconditions be met before engaging in negotiations. Yet the failure to make significant progress continued to hurt Guatemala's international image. At the beginning of 1990, conscious of the elections later that year, President Cerezo indicated a willingness to engage in

exploratory talks without preconditions. In February he appointed Bishop Quezada to the newly created post of conciliator.

The first major breakthrough came during a secret meeting in Oslo, Norway in March 1990, facilitated by Paul Wee, the Assistant General Secretary of the Lutheran World Federation. For years Wee had sought out Guatemalan military and URNG leaders in the hope of getting them to talk to each other. This helped to develop a high level of rapprochement between the groups. After months of shuttle diplomacy, a URNG delegation met with a CNR delegation led by Jorge Serrano in a government-owned chalet outside Oslo, with their expenses paid by the Norwegian government. After a number of days, they signed the Oslo Accord – that created a framework for negotiations that would last, despite stops-and-starts, for the next six years.

Sectoral consultations with the URNG

The Oslo Accord was based on the premise that peace would result from a participatory and stable democracy. A main provision was to call for dialogue between the URNG and different sectors of society. From late May to late October 1990, a series of five meetings – each lasting several days – that became known as the 'Oslo consultations' were convened by the CNR outside Guatemala to fulfil this agreement.

The consultation process was designed as a series of sectoral meetings for both practical and political reasons. The CNR recognized that it was not feasible to have all the sectors involved in the same meeting. For example, both the military and the URNG – though for different reasons – wanted the business sector to participate in the consultations; yet the social groups did not have much trust in this sector. They believed that meetings would need to be relatively small if they were to address the underlying challenges Guatemala faced. The CNR also wanted to take advantage of the sectoral work initiated during the GND. Bishop Quezada chaired each consultation meeting and helped to ensure that they were conducted in an open and respectful manner. The UN Secretary-General also sent his personal representative to observe the meetings. The agendas were left open so that the representatives of each sector could use it as an opportunity to present their views and to recommend strategies to end the armed conflict.

The meetings were held outside Guatemala in part because the URNG remained banned but also because the CNR realized that in-country meetings would be under military intelligence surveillance that could inhibit open dialogue. The host governments covered most of the costs and made the logistical arrangements. Initial plans to hold a meeting in the US were abandoned when

visas for some of the URNG commanders were denied; it was subsequently moved to Canada.

The first meeting was held in El Escorial, Spain with a delegation from ten political parties. In their joint declaration, the URNG promised to not interfere with elections and the political parties agreed to support a National Constituent Assembly. It seemed to indicate that the URNG was preparing itself for the transition to constitutional politics. The second meeting was held in Ottawa, Canada with the business sector represented in the CACIF – a dialogue that would have seemed unthinkable previously. Although they did not agree a joint statement, the URNG and the CACIF later issued separate communiqués expressing their commitment to further negotiations and recognizing the goodwill of the other in the search for peace. The third meeting was held in Quito, Ecuador with religious groups. Their joint declaration emphasized the need for national consensus and respect for human rights. The fourth meeting was held in Metepec, Mexico involving representatives of unions and popular organizations. Their joint declaration emphasized that peace must be based on the resolution of underlying structural inequalities. The final meeting was held in Atlixco, Mexico and involved representatives of academic organizations, small businesses and cooperatives, and professional bodies. Their declaration reaffirmed the Oslo Accord and its consultation process and asked the CNR to convoke a similar dialogue process between the participating sectors and the government. The social groups also asked the government and the URNG to initiate a dialogue to end the war and address the country's underlying problems; their involvement in peacemaking was in turn recognized by the URNG, who asked them to keep participating.

With the exception of the Ottawa meeting with the CACIF, the resulting declarations called on the parties to hold direct negotiations urgently. They emphasized that all social sectors should participate in defining the institutional and constitutional reforms and recognized that human rights, social injustice and development issues must be addressed. The Oslo consultations reinforced a tendency that had emerged in the GND. It created a political space where ideas about important social issues could be expressed; it crystallized the demand that these themes be included in negotiations in a way that did not necessarily correspond with the views of the main protagonists. As one direct outcome, the URNG demanded that the negotiations distinguish between substantive themes (such as state reforms and changes in the socio-economic structure) and operative themes (such as a ceasefire or demobilization).

The Oslo consultations resulted in significant changes to the political dynamics of peacemaking. Both the army and the URNG wanted to use the consultations to

promote their interests. The army – which perceived the URNG as a defeated force – assumed initially that the URNG sought an honourable face-saving way out of the conflict. It also assumed the URNG would be subjected to intense scrutiny by the various sectors. For its part, the URNG leaders did not see themselves as conceding anything through the process. Instead they saw it as an opportunity to openly express their voice and their proposals for resolving the conflict, while at the same time isolating war proposals of the army commanders. In retrospect, it appears that the URNG calculated correctly. Almost immediately, the army was marginalized politically. It responded by trying to stop the process after the first meeting with the political parties and the next meeting, which was with the business sector, was almost cancelled because of the army's pressure. Yet the momentum for the process had become unstoppable.

An indirect outcome of the process was that several sectors enhanced their internal organization after the Oslo consultations. During 1991, the organizations that met in Metepec formed what would later become the Civil Sector Coordination (CSC). The groups that met in Atlixco formed the Civil Coordination for Peace (COCIPAZ). The former tended to share positions with the URNG, whereas the latter tended to be more independent. These bodies were to play an important role in lobbying for greater civil society participation in the formal peace negotiations in the years to come. Yet several sectors were still divided by serious political disputes. Civil society reflected these polarizations, with the labour and popular organizations appearing closest to the URNG and the private sector closer to the governmental forces. There were no direct efforts to discuss these differences and these sectors operated in isolation from each other, with few efforts to even establish communication channels between them. Paradoxically, both the military and the URNG became involved in the activation of these civil society sectors as each sought to create alliances and win their support. The Oslo consultations also effectively laid the groundwork for the participation of the sectors in the Civil Society Assembly.

The Oslo consultations and the GND helped to bring about a transformation in public opinion in favour of a negotiated process to end the armed confrontation – even amongst those who had been most staunchly opposed to recognizing the URNG. Furthermore, many began to perceive the war as resulting from deeper underlying structural problems and the URNG as a manifestation of these problems rather than as the primary cause of the conflict. The issues identified and discussed through these processes were later incorporated into the official negotiating agenda and eventually helped to shape the agreements reached.