

Embedding global citizens' assemblies: A bottom-up perspective from Mozambican rural communities

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Preface

Global citizens' assemblies are often portrayed as a critical part missing in the infrastructure of global governance. By 'giving everyone a seat at the global governance table,' high-quality policies are generated, citizens are inspired to take action, and respect and solidarity grow across cultures.¹

But how exactly are global citizens' assemblies experienced in local communities? How does this global process connect to local concerns, mobilise action, build solidarity, and generate lasting impact? What governance mechanisms should be in place to embed global citizens' assemblies in local communities?

To answer these questions, the Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN) commissioned Amiltone Luis and Lucas Veloso to take a deep dive into how a rural community in Mozambique experienced the world's first Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis and generate recommendations on how future global citizens' assemblies can be better embedded in local communities.

Luis and Veloso make a powerful team. Luis is part of RADEZA, a Mozambiquan NGO campaigning for environmental stewardship and sustainable community development. In 2021, Luis served as one of the community hosts of the Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency. His responsibilities included translating the proceedings of the Global Assembly and localising the content of the information packet for the Mozambiquan Assembly Member. Veloso, meanwhile, served as a volunteer notetaker in the Global Assembly and then joined the international research team (the precursor of GloCAN) that evaluated the Global Assembly. Veloso is a respected activist in Brazil supporting a movement that resisted the stigmatisation of people with mental health issues. Together, Luis and Veloso provide a distinct perspective on how a global enterprise can make a hyper-local impact.

¹ 'Why the Global Assembly Matters' in Report of the 2021 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis (Global Assembly Team, 2022, pp. 24-40).

More than providing actionable insights for future global citizens' assemblies, we see this report as a celebration of local community organisations – the backbone of any global citizens' assembly – for without their tireless efforts, no global citizens' assembly would be possible.

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Key Findings

This technical paper examines how global citizens' assemblies, particularly those taking place online, can connect, engage, and make an impact in rural communities from the Global South. The insights we put forward in this paper are based on the experience of the province Zambezia in Mozambique – one of the communities selected in the global location lottery² of the world's first Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Emergency in 2021.

Here are our findings based on semi-structured interviews with community organisers, activists, and members of NGOs in Zambezia.

1. There are existing mechanisms for direct citizen participation in Zambezia that are consistent with the values promoted by global citizens' assemblies. These institutions promote voice, inclusion, and deliberation, albeit constrained by partisanship, gender inequality, and insufficient resources.
2. Community leaders and local media, such as community radios, drive the promotion of participatory events in rural communities, and so their roles are important when amplifying the vision and outcomes of a global citizens' assembly. Digital infrastructure remains poor, so amplification strategies that use social media or video streaming are less relevant in this context.
3. There are institutionalised forms of citizen participation, such as a Local Consultative Council, which fosters deliberation between politicians and citizens, and a Natural Resources Committee that empowers citizens to allocate resources to projects that citizens consider relevant to their everyday lives. Some participatory initiatives, however, remain ad-hoc and short-term, which makes long-term capacity building and efforts at community inclusion unsustainable. Initiatives like a global citizens' assembly are at risk of having an unsustainable legacy if their future versions are not designed for long-term impact.

² For more information, see the Global Assembly Full Report (2022, pp. 24-40).

4. Recruitment via random selection is only meaningful with community connection. Most of our respondents were enthusiastic about the idea of a global citizens' assembly, but they are concerned that random selection limits the representation of people most deeply and urgently affected by the topic discussed in the citizens' assembly.

Our recommendations on how to improve the impact of global citizens' assemblies on the hyper-local level are presented on the next page.



Recommendations

Mapping the participatory context of a rural community in Mozambique leads us to the following recommendations.

1. *Design random selection with community connection.* Our research participants suggest that a global citizens' assembly should make it a clear expectation for Assembly Members to disseminate their acquired knowledge to the wider community and carry the community's values and immediate needs when they take part in deliberation. Strengthening the local assemblies component of a global citizens' assembly may be a suitable starting point to address this concern.
2. *Embed the global citizens' assembly in existing spaces for participation.* While global citizens' assemblies aim to be "docked" in institutions of global governance, they can also be "docked" in local participatory institutions, which include local councils, community groups and networks, securing the support of community leaders and local journalists,
3. *Design for sustainable partnerships and capacity building.* A global citizens' assembly may have a lasting and sustainable impact in communities by documenting knowledge and techniques learned from organising the assembly and using these insights in reforming existing and designing new participatory institutions. Local communities may also document their experiences embedding the global citizens' assembly in their communities, which can be turned over to community hosts of future Assembly Members.

Background

This technical paper aims to provide actionable recommendations on how global citizens' assemblies can be embedded in local communities. While it is critical to think about how global citizens' assemblies can be connected to institutions of global governance, it is equally important to consider plausible ways these processes can impact the hyper-local level where deliberations are taking place.

Case study: The Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis

We developed our technical paper by focusing on the case of the world's first Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis. The Global Assembly brought together 100 citizens selected through a global location lottery to address the question: "How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?" After 68 hours of deliberations spread over eleven weeks, Assembly Members generated a People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth, first delivered at COP26 in Glasgow.

Aside from connecting the Global Assembly's output to formal institutions of climate governance, the Global Assembly also sought to contribute to wider discussions in the public sphere. The Global Assembly's initiatives include³:

- *Media presence.* From 2021 to 2023, the Global Assembly was featured in over fifty publications, including the BBC and The Guardian. Most media features were in English, which peaked at the beginning (the launch) and the end of the Assembly.
- *Social media promotion.* Social media was also used to disseminate the process and outcomes of citizen deliberation, including the Global Assembly's Twitter (X) and YouTube accounts. Social media engagement, for the most part, was minimal.
- *Media training.* Assembly Members and the core delivery team received professional media training to prepare for radio, television, and conference appearances.

³ For more information, see the Global Assembly Full Report (2022, pp. 179-240).

- *The cultural wave.* Artists from around the world sought to translate the Global Assembly’s vision into popular culture to foster interest from the broader population.
- *Local assemblies.* These assemblies replicated, albeit on a smaller scale, the debates that took place in the Global Assembly. More than 1,300 participants took part in local assemblies from 41 countries. Only 59 of the 1,300 participants completed the feedback forms, so we have little basis to determine the extent to which these assemblies were successful from the participants' perspectives.

The extent to which these initiatives made an impact in the public sphere and how they can be improved is discussed in various reports on the Global Assembly (Curato et al., 2023, pp.113-137; Global Assembly Team, 2021, pp. 213-215; 237-240). From our perspective, however, missing from these reports is a sharper focus on how the Global Assembly can be firmly situated at a hyper-local level and directly make an impact in the everyday lives of the community from which the Assembly Member is from. This is an important line of enquiry. Many communities that took part in the Global Assembly had poor digital infrastructure, which made it difficult for local organisers to amplify the Global Assembly’s message on social media. Different communities also have different norms of citizen participation, so participatory interventions that rely on toolkits and standard design features may not necessarily take root in communities whose cultures and practices do not align with the prescribed participatory design. These considerations inspired us to think about concrete ways in which the Global Assembly can be better embedded in local communities in a way that recognises local needs, interests and modes of engagement that resonate with the people.

Collaboration and data collection

Our research began with a collaboration with RADEZA – a non-governmental network advocating environmental stewardship and sustainable community development and embracing the principles of citizen association and autonomy. In 2021, RADEZA was a community host at the Global Assembly. Part of their role is to support the deliberative journey of a Mozambican Assembly member selected through a civic lottery. The Global Citizens’ Assembly Network (GloCAN) approached RADEZA to take part in this study, given their experience in organising the Global Assembly in the district of Zambezia – a culturally diverse community in Mozambique facing an array of economic, social, and political challenges.

RADEZA brokered a series of semi-structured interviews with members of their team as well as members of the Zambezia platform – a network of NGOs, associations, and political entities adept in political and social engagement with the rural communities of the Zambezia province. Drawing on RADEZA’s experience, we sent invitations to those platform members with the most experience in citizen participation activities, asking them to participate in interviews. In total, we interviewed four activists and NGO members specialising in ecology, citizen economics, and women’s rights. In our interviews, we learned about their experiences in fostering citizen participation in Zambezia. They offered insights about the participatory context of Zambezia and put forward insights on transnational citizens’ assemblies, particularly how these can do better at connecting, engaging, and impacting rural communities like Zambezia. The interviewees received a preliminary version of this document and contributed to its consolidation.

Research Findings

Mozambique is located in southeastern Africa and has a population of 33 million speaking at least 43 languages. Around 60% of the population lives in rural areas⁴, including the district of Zambezia. Zambezia (and Mozambique more broadly) navigates a complex political landscape after the violent 2017 Cabo Delgado insurgency. That tragic event, still having effects felt today, incited violence, caused population displacement, and worsened the political and socio-economic landscape.⁵ The 2023 CIVICUS Monitor Report shows a trend toward a more repressive environment. The 2023 Freedom House Report rates the country's freedom of expression as “partially free.” Gender disparities and violence continue to impact women's economic, political, and reproductive autonomy. When considering digital connectivity in Mozambique, even with an increase in internet users, over 75% of the population, particularly in rural areas, remains without internet access⁶.

The participatory context of Zambezia

To understand how the Global Assembly can make an impact in a rural community like Zambezia, we asked our research participants to characterise their community's participatory context. Our key findings are as follows.

First, we found existing mechanisms and practices for direct citizen participation, which are consistent with the values promoted by the Global Assembly.

1. *Diversity of engagement practices.* Citizen engagement in Zambezia encompasses various activities, including campaigns focused on local economic issues, environmental preservation, and women's empowerment. There is significant citizen involvement in both municipal and provincial government assemblies, as well as in local councils and committees dedicated to resource management. The people

⁴ Worldometer. "Mozambique Population (Live)." Accessed November 19, 2023. [URL: <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/mozambique-population/>]

⁵ International Crisis Group. "Making the Most of EU's Integrated Approach in Mozambique." Accessed January 31, 2023. [URL: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/east-and-southern-africa/mozambique/making-most-eus-integrated-approach-mozambique>].

⁶ DataReportal. "Digital 2022 Mozambique." February 15, 2022. Accessed December 17, 2023. [URL: <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-mozambique>].

of Zambezia, in other words, have experience in participatory processes at various levels of government, covering a range of topics.

2. *Institutionalised citizen participation.*

- Advisory Councils (CCs) and Local Councils (CLs) range from district to community levels, involving citizens, government officials, community leaders, and private sector members. Their main focus is on the design and implementation of Strategic District Development Programs (PESOD). Despite diverse participation in these environments, interviewees noted a dominance of political parties and NGOs. While the government seems attentive to these events, these councils are largely seen as consultative with limited decision-making impact.
- The CGRN (Committee for Natural Resource Management) is a community-based entity established to manage funds from taxes on natural resource exploitation, like timber and charcoal. It's seen as highly impactful, promoting training and funding local projects, including agricultural initiatives.

3 *Mechanisms for amplification. Community leaders and local media promote participatory events in rural communities. Community radios are utilised for broader outreach.* Internet use is not widespread, but phone calls and text messages are used to identify key participants for citizen events.

While these enabling conditions for participation exist, there remain challenges.

1. *Material barriers to participation.* Our research participants identified barriers to participation, including the cost of transportation and the distance of the location of the participatory events from the communities where citizens live. Other barriers are more basic, such as citizens experiencing hunger, food insecurity, and communication difficulties. Providing incentives for participation may address some of these barriers, such as offering young people useful items such as bicycles and phones. As one research participant puts it:

Here we have many poor people who can't afford three meals a day, and if they manage to get their first meal, they prefer to save it for the evening (...) Up to now, in the areas where one goes, if they brought an extra piece of clothing, they might end up giving it to a family in need. A mother with a baby, a child on her back (...) She's there with her hoe, hoping to

cultivate something. So, for such a person, to have this kind of luck [being chosen to participate in a citizens' assembly], frankly [they need support].

Adequate preparation so that citizens are safe and comfortable to participate, is also essential. Another respondent shared:

First, we need to identify [participant vulnerabilities], and we must have a translator. We need to explain to the person, right? Prepare them verbally so they're not frightened (...) because up to now, here in Mozambique (...), when they see someone of a different colour, they get scared. So, we would prepare that person to be very comfortable, for them to understand that the person is just like us (...) The person needs to be prepared, otherwise they'll be given a computer and freeze!

2. *Politicization of participation.* Citizens hesitate to engage in participatory activities because they are worried about being tagged as aligned with the political opposition. Others worry that partisan political divides are brought to participatory events. These statements from our respondents explain the nature of these apprehensions.

Members of the ruling party at the community level are the ones who most readily identify themselves. On the other hand, members of the opposition party don't identify themselves and don't attend meetings (participatory events). So, there's a (inferiority) complex (...) that the party in power was the one that brought independence to the country (...) so history tells (...) so they feel apprehensive.

One problem we might encounter in participation is the political aspect, right? We have this issue of who is from the ruling party and who is from the opposition, right? (...) So, some people bring these external issues inside (...) Thus, sometimes the meetings we have to solve our problems end up being about discussing partisan politics.

- 4 *Inequalities in voice.* Our research participants observed that women, the elderly, and young people are active in citizen participation. Women, in particular, are active in participatory events in terms of the number and quality of their contributions. However, despite women's strong presence in participatory events, our research participants find that many women still find it difficult for their voices to be heard, as participatory events still prioritise male voices. Women still express discomfort in challenging men's voices. Some women are also experiencing trauma, such as those who experienced domestic violence, and so specialised support is needed for them to feel safe in

articulating their views. While mechanisms for participation, such as Local Consultative Councils, exist, our research participants find that citizens tend to speak less when politicians are present, unlike in the Natural Resource Committee, where politicians are absent.

Another issue we might face, to a certain extent, is the problem with women's participation. Women participate, and some are present, but our issue is one of voice. (...) It's a cultural process; when a man speaks, the woman often ends up without a voice, especially if she feels that speaking up might contradict her husband. (...) Therefore, one of our strategies is to ask women to speak first, followed by the men.

- 5 *Clash with traditional knowledge.* Community members with traditional roles, such as healers, refrain from participating in participatory events because of the risk of delegitimising their knowledge in front of authorities or experts. As our research participants explain:

On one hand, they (the healers) feel a prejudice against them. Typically, in Mozambique, we go to a healer, but it's taboo. We can't say that we visited a healer (...) because it's like admitting we lack knowledge. But it's our tradition, our culture. So, they don't identify themselves as such, for the most part (...) because of the prejudice they feel.

What still poses a problem is the cultural aspect (...) because many of the things we bring to the communities are more scientific (...) But the community has its way of being, its way of doing things (...) that have been passed down to their descendants (...) So we have to be careful not to clash with the community's principles (...), not to say that this is incorrect, but to show that there are also other ways.

- 6 *Poor digital infrastructure.* Rural communities like Zambezia have little setup for digital communication. Using the Internet remains costly, which makes it challenging from community members to take part in long-form online forms of participation, such as an online global citizens' assembly.
- 7 *Unsustainable participatory initiatives.* Although there are institutionalised forms of citizen participation, such as the Local Consultative Council and the Natural Resource Committee, many participatory initiatives remain short-term, making these programmes unsustainable.

“In terms of challenges, how to ensure the sustainability of these debates. Because what we do, in principle, is based on a project. The project ends, and sometimes it becomes a bit difficult to return to the field (...) but it's important to (...) maintain clear communication between institutions and with the communities themselves. But it's a challenge due to the priorities of projects, which usually tend to be of a short-term nature..”

Embedding global citizens' assemblies in rural communities

Having mapped the participatory context in Zambezia, we asked our research participants to reflect on the design and implementation of the Global Assembly and propose ways in which its process and impact can be embedded in rural communities. Overall, most of our research participants expressed enthusiasm for the design of the Global Assembly and are supportive of the prospect of holding future global citizens' assemblies. They raised the following considerations for future assemblies to be better embedded in rural communities.

1. *Random selection is only meaningful with community connection.* Our research participants raised concerns about random selection as the main mechanism for recruiting Assembly Members. They were concerned that random selection limits the representation of people most deeply and urgently affected by the topic discussed in the citizens' assembly. They were also concerned about the seeming individualistic design of a citizens' assembly, where an Assembly Member is not expected to maintain a strong connection with their community. Without this expectation, the Assembly Members and the citizens' assembly risk reputational damage for promoting a process detached from the wider community. Our research participants suggest that a global citizens' assembly should make it a clear expectation for Assembly Members to disseminate their acquired knowledge to the broader community and carry the community's values and immediate needs. Strengthening the local assemblies component of a global citizens' assembly may be a suitable starting point to address this concern (see p. 9 in this report).
2. *Embed the global citizens' assembly in existing spaces for participation.* Aside from hosting local assemblies, global citizens' assemblies can maximise existing spaces for participation. Consider engaging with:
 - Participatory institutions so deliberations in the global citizens' assembly can inform the deliberations in local institutions such as

the Local Consultative Council and Natural Resource Committee. While global citizens' assemblies aim to be “docked” in institutions of global governance, they can also be “docked” in local participatory institutions.

- Community leaders by presenting the assembly's project to them and keeping them informed about the process, especially in regions where selected participants live. Winning their trust is crucial for promoting the assembly, generating interest, and establishing its credibility within the community. Additionally, they could act as a source of local knowledge and interests for the assembly members, enhancing their contributions to assembly debates. As one research participant puts it:

The first step we need to take is the inclusion of community leaders. This is a key factor in engaging with a community. You can't just enter an area and start holding meetings without speaking to the community leaders. But if you can win over the community leaders, they will mobilize the entire community to participate in your meetings.

- Community groups by tapping on their networks to inform the Assembly Member of the community's views and for the Assembly Member to reflect and convey these views in global deliberations. Community groups may also provide the local infrastructure to host the Assembly Members, such as schools and town halls. This approach is crucial in countering the impression that citizens' assemblies are individualistic enterprises and fostering a tangible link between local knowledge and needs on a global scale, thereby enhancing the representativeness and impact of these democratic innovations. One of our research respondents had this proposal:

If we had the chance, if that possibility existed in our city, to have those giant screens. So, we could set them up in a field or public space where the population should be watching (...), and they would be constantly there, able to participate. Those giant screens that we have seen elsewhere, if we could have that here, oh, we would convince the municipality and the population of the Zambezia province.

Regarding the strategy to involve more communities and engage the government in the global assembly (...) I think first we need to seek all possible ways to connect with them in the community,

using screens (...) Yes, it's with this approach that we think we can work because we can create a tripartite system. First, we have a group from the community gathered at a certain point. So that they can participate and effectively voice their problems. On the other hand, we take the media to meet with them to allow them to give their opinion on the climate emergency. Thirdly, we involve the government officials to allow them also to contribute their views on this matter. So, we will have a global assembly that is comprehensive at the community level. (...) to ensure and have direct communication with those who are the beneficiaries, those who suffer from climate problems.

- Organisers of a global citizens' assembly may consider providing gifts that publicise the event and recognise the contribution of community groups. Merchandise such as t-shirts, caps, and other everyday items are well-received in a community context. It not only provides visibility and, therefore, raises awareness about the global citizens' assembly, but it also demonstrates appreciation for the community group's participation and builds a sense of inclusion.

Young people are somewhat more distant from these processes; they want processes that offer incentives and recognition. When we bring the project of associations to them, we have to offer something, like a bicycle or other things, and then they show up. The youth want to feel some immediate return from these projects. They like having incentives. The older ones, however, understand that these projects are meant to help the community.

- Local media by engaging with local journalists, radio commentators, and influencers to explain the vision of the global citizens' assembly, what this means for their community, and what the rest of the community can do to support their Assembly Members. Journalists are also critical in translating the declarations and recommendations from the global assembly to local issues, as well as in crafting and implementing a communication plan that clarifies the non-partisan and non-ideological character of the global citizens' assembly.

3. Design for sustainable partnerships and capacity building. A global citizens' assembly may be a one-off or periodic event, but it can potentially have a lasting and sustainable impact in communities where Assembly Members are from, as well as the citizens' assembly itself. For

example, local partners can document their experiences embedding the global citizens' assembly in their communities, which can be turned over to community hosts of future Assembly Members. Community partners may also systematise the knowledge they developed from the global assembly, which may be applied to future participatory events or reforming existing participatory institutions.

During the intervals of the Assembly events (...) there should be discussions to find a mechanism, a structure, not too heavy (...) or a figure who can disseminate the information. Because it can't just end there. If there isn't something to keep feeding the process (...) it will be very difficult to achieve long-term or medium-term results. It would just be the holding of the assembly, the declaration, and nothing more. And who controls it at a global level? And at a local level? (...) Our representative, after participating in the assembly, asked what happened next. The declaration circulated here? Did the NGOs working in the communities have access to the declaration? (...) How can we say whether they were effectively implemented or not? (...) That's why I advocate for a structure, one that isn't too heavy (...) that interacts with organisations (...) at the local level to feed and seek information for the next assembly (...) We need periodicity (...) what is the frequency with which we will say citizens gather to talk about themselves?



Future Research

Our research focused on the experience of Zambezia, and therefore our findings cannot be generalised to other communities. We hope this research can be replicated in other contexts, especially in rural, remote and conflict-affected areas, to get a more holistic understanding of how global citizens' assemblies can be embedded in local contexts.



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Ethics declaration

This research was approved by the University of Canberra's Human Ethics Committee (ID: 13354: Governance Review of the Global Assembly)