

Designing Global Citizens' Assemblies for Impact: Power Mapping of the United Nations System

Global Citizens' Assembly Network
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Aishwarya Machani
Iswe Foundation (United Kingdom)



Preface

The first task of designing a global citizens' assembly for impact is to identify its advocates in institutions of global governance. Without advocates, global citizens' assemblies risk being reduced to spectacular but inconsequential 'talk shops' without any credible pathway for impact. Which influential actors are open to the idea of direct citizen participation in global governance? What openings are available for global citizens' assemblies to be meaningfully connected to debates, deliberations, and decision-making in global institutions?

The Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN) commissioned Aishwarya Machani to identify key actors operating in and around the United Nations system, and to assess the extent of their support or opposition towards institutionalising a global citizens' assembly at the UN. She finds an opening in generating support among Member States who may have seen the value of citizen assemblies in their countries, and among non-state actors. The paper advances proposals to build a global movement among civil society actors to strengthen the normative force of campaigns advocating for a global citizens' assembly. These findings provide key insights for ongoing conversations about potentially institutionalising global citizens' assemblies.

The technical paper ends with reflections on where more research and action are needed to further knowledge and momentum for citizens' assemblies to carve out their space in global governance. We hope more voices will join GloCAN in continuing this conversation and imagining plausible pathways to democratise global governance through direct citizen participation.

Nardine Alnemr and Nicole Curato
Co-Leads
Global Citizens' Assembly Network

Key Findings

This technical paper maps key actors operating in and around the United Nations (UN) system in terms of their power to set the agenda, include or exclude stakeholders, and act on recommendations. It also examines their likely support or opposition towards initiatives to promote direct citizen participation, such as a global citizens' assembly at the UN.

This power mapping exercise found that Member States have an almost unlimited degree of visible power over agenda-setting and actioning recommendations at the UN. Although some groups of Member States are more likely to support initiatives to promote citizen participation at the UN than others, Member States are generally sceptical about any non-state actors participating at the UN. Still, Member States that have seen the value, for example, of citizens' assemblies in their respective countries may be open to championing more direct citizen participation in the future. In general, however, the UN system is largely unfamiliar with the concept of direct citizen participation, and slow to change.

Non-state actors, however, have a significant degree of hidden and invisible power at the UN. Civil society organisations, think tanks, individual actors, and platforms have the potential to shape agendas at the UN. Amongst non-state actors, support for initiatives to promote citizen participation at the UN is likely to be high.

Five key recommendations can be taken away from this power mapping exercise for the community of practice interested in organising global citizens' assemblies that have an impact at the UN. They are as follows:

- 1. Develop a clear theory of change to ensure that assemblies are impact-driven**
- 2. Build a movement around assemblies**
- 3. Fundraise for impact as well as delivery**
- 4. Ensure assemblies produce relevant and actionable recommendations**
- 5. Advocate that global citizens' assemblies are a way to enhance rather than undermine the power of actors operating in and around the UN system**

Background

Integrating spaces for direct citizen participation in existing global governance institutions is complex. The Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis (2021), which aimed to link citizen deliberation to deliberations at the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) that took place in Glasgow in 2021, highlighted the “challenges of influencing global governance at the institutional level.”¹

To explore these challenges more closely, this paper maps out key actors operating in and around the UN system in terms of their power to agenda-set, include or exclude stakeholders, and act on recommendations, and in terms of their likely support or opposition towards initiatives to promote citizen participation at the UN. It aims to support the community of practice interested in organising global citizens’ assemblies to enhance their impact on global governance at the institutional level.

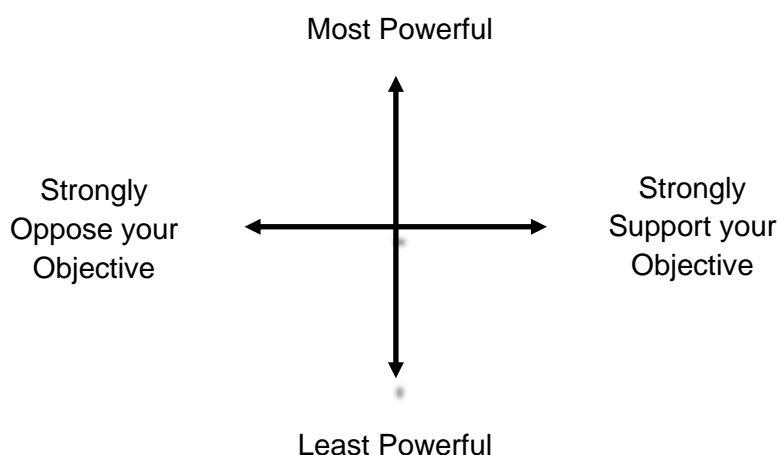
This paper is based on a power mapping framework widely used in strategy design since the 1980s (Figure 1). Mapping actors across the four quadrants can help practitioners visualise and understand who holds power. This, in turn, can help practitioners to effectively allocate time and resources, allowing them to maximise the impact of their initiatives.

Fundamental to this paper is the concept of power. As Hay argues, power is “probably the most universal and fundamental concept of political analysis”². Yet, there is no single way to understand it. This paper leverages this ambiguity, drawing on three distinct but not mutually exclusive ways of understanding power.

¹ See: Global Assembly Evaluation Report. Available at: https://researchsystem.canberra.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/82182314/Global_Assembly_Evaluation_Report.pdf. All links cited in this technical paper were last accessed on 02/02/2024.

² Hay, Divided by a Common Language: Political Theory and the Concept of Power, *Political Studies Association*, Vo. 17, No. 1, 1997.

Figure 1: Power Map Framework



Source: The Change Agency, 2023³

First, this paper draws on John Gaventa’s “power cube” – a framework for analysing the “spaces, places, and forms” of power, as well as the relationships between them (Figure 2). Especially important to note within this framework are the “hidden” and “invisible” forms of power. Actors with hidden power may have no observable decision-making authority but influence global governance by controlling what lands on the agenda and which actors are included or excluded. Meanwhile, actors with invisible power – the “most insidious of the three” forms of power – shape the boundaries of participation by influencing the way in which individuals think about themselves and those around them⁴. By drawing on the power cube framework, this paper pays attention to both observable and insidious forms of power, though the latter is, by its very nature difficult to map.

Second, power is understood in terms of degree. Curato et al. argue that the way in which power-holders exert their power varies: some are capable of overtly constraining the actions of others, whilst others exert power by influencing narratives⁵. This is similar to the argument made by Gaventa about the existence of observable and insidious forms of nature, but what Curato et al. add is the idea that the reason why actors exert their power in different ways is because

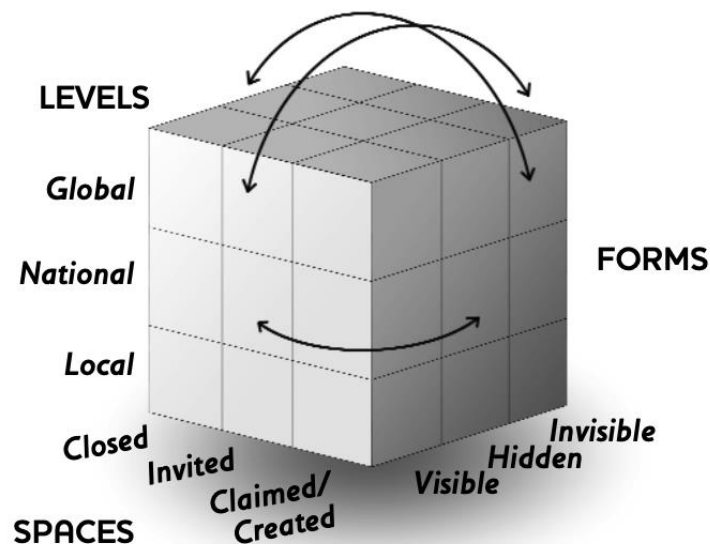
³ See: Power Map Framework. Available at: <https://thechangeagency.org/power-mapping-template/>.

⁴ Gaventa, Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis, *IDS Bulletin*, Vol. 36, No. 6, 2006, p.29.

⁵ Curato et al., *Power in Deliberative Democracy: Norms, Forums, Systems*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

they have different “degrees” of power⁶. This suggests both that power can be measured and that the way in which actors exert their power can be used as an indicator for this measurement. This logic is used to measure the degree of power held by specific actors throughout this paper.

Figure 2: The Power Cube



Source: Gaventa, 2006, p. 25

Third, the concept of normative power is introduced briefly in this paper. Normative power is “ideational rather than material or physical”⁷. In the absence of a world government, ideas are “powerful and consequential coordinating devices”⁸. This means that normative power is particularly important at the global level, though it is exerted at all spaces, places, and forms of power.

Finally, it is worth establishing why – given that the UN is not the only nor perhaps even the most important global governance forum – this paper chooses to focus on the UN. It is true that global governance decisions are increasingly being taken in issue-specific fora, such as COP and the World Health Assembly, and mini-lateral fora, such as the G20 and the African Union. However, the UN has played a vital historical role in global governance, and it continues to be the forum that brings together the most issues and state and non-state actors.

⁶ Ibid., 2019., p.13.

⁷ Ian Manners, *The Concept of Normative Power in World Politics*, DIIS, Brief, 2009.

⁸ Dryzek, *Green Democracy, Global Governance*, Academy of the Social Sciences, Canberra, 2010, p.7.

Studying the UN, therefore, is a good way to get a broad overview of where power lies in global governance. Some of the findings in this paper may also be applicable to other global governance forums.

Methodology

To identify and map the respective power and interests of critical actors in and around the UN, interviews were conducted with seven people who study and/or work with the UN. Some key actors operating in and around the UN system are excluded from this power mapping exercise. We chose to focus on particularly powerful and/or interested actors during interviews.

The interviews lasted between 40 and 70 minutes and were semi-structured to keep focus whilst maintaining the freedom to explore issues the interviewees wanted to discuss. Additional desk research into some of the actors and initiatives mentioned by interviewees was then carried out to add clarity (not content) to the findings.

- Daniel Perrell - United Nations Representative at the Baha'i International Community and Co-Chair of the Coalition for the UN We Need.
- David Steven - Senior Fellow at the United Nations Foundation.
- Helen Morton - Political Advocacy Consultant for the World Health Organization.
- Nudhara Yusuf - Executive Global Governance Innovation Network Coordinator at The Stimson Center.
- Farsan Ghassim - Junior Research Fellow in Politics at Queen's College, Oxford University.
- Pelle Enarsson - Swedish diplomat and Senior Advisor at the United Nations Foundation.
- Shimri Zameret - Activist and lecturer and researcher at the University of Michigan.

All interviewees consented to using their names and affiliations in this paper. Direct quotes from interviews are used to illustrate interviewees' perspectives, but these quotes are disidentified.

Findings

Drawing on the expertise and experience of our informants, I mapped key actors operating in and around the UN system according to the degree of power they hold, and their likely support for initiatives to promote citizen participation at the UN. Figure 3 summarises these findings.

Two cross-cutting findings emerged from the interviews, which indicate general levels of support for citizen participation at the UN. First, several interviewees noted that citizen participation is a “foreign concept” at the UN. Unlike at the local and national level where demand signals for citizen participation are increasingly articulate and widespread, demand signals for citizen participation at the global level remain weak. Most actors have either never considered the need for citizens to have a direct say in global governance or believe that citizens do not need a say because their interests are already being represented by their governments or civil society organisations. It would take time for such a concept to take root. A second, closely related observation made by interviewees is that the UN is slow to change. One interviewee went as far as to say that anything that “looks like it will jeopardise tradition will be met with resistance”.

Both findings reflect the fact that – as one interviewee put it – the UN is built on the principle of “representative” rather than “direct” participation. The UN Charter, for example, makes it clear that “We the Peoples of the United Nations” will be represented at the UN by “[their] respective governments”. In response to growing awareness of governments’ inability to represent the interests of all their constituents, the UN has slowly opened its doors to non-state representatives of “We the Peoples”.

At the 1992 Earth Summit, for example, the UN established nine “Major Groups” to be an interface between the UN and the world’s people; these groups continue to be the main avenue through which non-state actors engage with the UN⁹.

⁹ There are now twenty-one “Major Groups and Other Stakeholders”, which comprise diverse stakeholder constituencies. The nine original Major Groups are as follows: women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organisations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific and technological community, and

Thus, any initiative designed to allow citizens to engage directly with the UN represents a departure from the status quo.

The bottom-left quadrant of the grid is left empty. This can be explained by the fact that interviews were focused on particularly powerful and/or interested actors.

Actors in the UN system actors and citizen participation

The actors in Figure 3 are divided into the following groups:

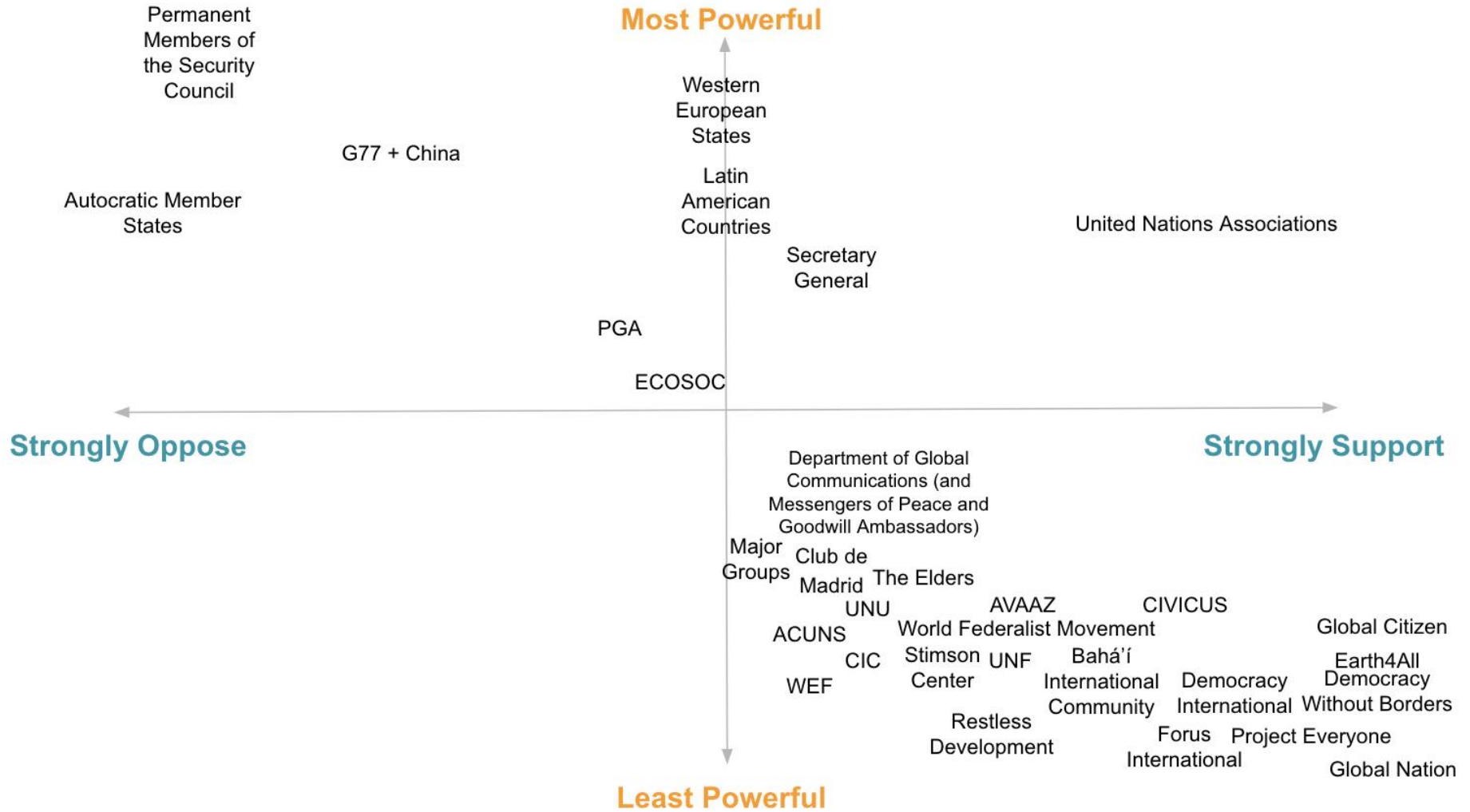
- Member States (General Assembly and Security Council)
- President of the General Assembly
- UN Secretariat
 - Secretary-General
 - Department of Global Communications
- Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)
- Civil Society Organisations
- Think Tanks
- Private Sector Organisations
- Individuals
- Platforms

The first four groups emerge from the UN System Chart (Appendix 2); the remaining groups were identified by interviewees. Although they appear in the UN System Chart, non-UN Charter bodies, such as UNICEF, the World Health Organisation (WHO), or the World Bank, are excluded from this power mapping exercise. This is because interviewees argued that the power of such organisations tends to be restricted to their thematic domain, rather than cross-cutting.

An analysis of potential support within each group follows after Figure 3.

farmers. Each of these Major Groups is managed by three “organizing partners” – often prominent organisations within their constituency.

Figure 3: Grid Mapping out Key Actors Operating in and around the UN System according to Degree of Power and Likely Support of Initiatives to Promote Citizen Participation at the UN (own elaboration)



- **Member States: visible power and hidden politics**

“A lot of what happens at the UN is covert. 30 [Member States] might approve [of a recommendation], 50 might actively block it, but another 50 might silently block it.”

The UN is an organisation of 193 sovereign Member States. In principle, all Member States have equal power, but in practice some are effectively more powerful than most others, such as the permanent five (P5) and elected ten at the Security Council who have veto power over international peace and security decisions.¹⁰ Whilst the Security Council has visible power, the Western European and Other States have significant hidden power. And between these visible and hidden powers, decision-making is covert.

“Even the most progressive Member States do not have a clear stance on citizen participation.”

Secrecy is the dynamic of power politics between Member States at the UN, making it impossible to observe clear signs of support for citizen participation. Interviewees noted that many Member States are sceptical about *any* non-state actor participation at the UN, let alone citizens. They pointed, for example, to the limited interaction between state and non-state actors during the annual High-Level Week of the General Assembly and the closing of civil space across the world. As cited earlier, one interviewee noted the lack of clear “demand signals” regarding citizen participation.

Nonetheless, some groups of Member States are more likely to support citizen participation than others. Some Western European states have supported initiatives such as national citizens’ assemblies, which can suggest openness to supporting assemblies at the global level. Similarly, an interviewee highlighted that some Latin American and Small Island Developing States have a track record of including non-state actors in the UN. Interviewees suggested that this

¹⁰ Member State groupings in our power mapping (Fig. 3) reflect those self-determined (e.g. the Group of Friends of the Alliance of Civilisations or the G77), those determined by external observers (e.g. the Latin American Countries or Western European and Others), and those determined by institutional arrangements (e.g. The Security Council). Given the number of Member State groups – each of which represent different interests and have different degrees of power – the General Assembly, which brings together all Member States – is not included in the map (Fig. 3).

could indicate a willingness to endorse other forms of non-state participation at the UN. In fact, one interviewee observed the interest of some Latin American states in the idea of a United Nations Parliamentary Assembly.

Three groups of Member States might oppose direct citizen participation at the UN. First, interviewees noted that certain Member States, like the P5, are unlikely to welcome input from any actors that might perceptibly threaten their exclusivity on decision-making power. Second, interviewees pointed out that the G77 plus China had released a number of statements opposing the ethos of, or specific proposals within, the Secretary-General's "Our Common Agenda" report, which sets out a vision for a more "networked" and "inclusive" multilateral system. None of the statements released by the G77 plus China specifically condemn citizen participation. However, interviewees argued the statements hinted at either a general reticence to work with non-state actors or a concern that greater non-state participation at the UN would work in favour of "Global North" countries (see section below on Civil Society Organizations). Third, two interviewees noted that autocratic states that "do not draw their legitimacy from their people" might oppose citizen participation at the UN because it could threaten their authority at home. Interviewees stressed that opposing a recommendation does not necessarily mean Member States blocking it. Member States are unlikely to block any initiative until it is apparent that it could be a threat to their power. Also, Member States may find it too politically costly to block an initiative. After all, blocking could lead to an adverse reaction from other Member States or from their own national constituencies. Finally, although this paper has largely referred to Member States as unitary actors, they are actually formed of a number of actors. Principal - Agent drift¹¹ may mean that permanent representatives at the UN could let proposals pass that would have been blocked by their counterparts at the capital.

Equally, however, it is important to remember the risk of, as one interview put it, "isomorphic mimicry". Because of the risks associated with blocking

¹¹ The principal-agent relation is conceptualized in political theory. The principal-agent drift is explained by the argument that agents (bureaucratic representatives) tend to deviate from the mandate they have received from their principals (elected government officials). See for instance: Thomas Schillemans, Madalina Busuioc, Predicting Public Sector Accountability: From Agency Drift to Forum Drift, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, Volume 25, Issue 1, January 2015, Pages 191–215, <https://doi.org/10.1093/jopart/muu024>

initiatives and a general lack of transparency at the UN, it is possible for Member States to take on the appearance of implementing an initiative without doing so in any meaningful way. Indeed, interviewees pointed to a number of initiatives by Member States to engage with citizens, including the UN75 Initiative (see Appendix 1), which they deemed “tokenistic” given the one-off nature of the events, without a clear theory of change.

- **President of the General Assembly: figurehead or foreperson?**

As an elected representative of the General Assembly, the President of the General Assembly is answerable to the UN’s 193 Member States. Their term in office only lasts for one year (one General Assembly session). As one interviewee put it, this places a significant limit on their agenda-setting powers but “does not entirely extinguish them”. For example, Presidents of the General Assembly can hold informal thematic consultations; these may determine what issues Member State missions focus on – at least for a short period of time. One interviewee underlined the crucial role of Mogens Lykketoft, the 70th President of the General Assembly, to secure the relative success of the 1 for 8 billion (then 1 for 7 billion) campaign in 2016 (see Appendix 1).

Interviewees were less certain about whether the President of the General Assembly would systematically support citizen participation at the UN given, since each individual who fills the role will have different preferences. However, one interviewee remarked that a President of the General Assembly would probably be less receptive to the recommendations of a global citizens’ assembly if it were seen to be a potential threat to the agenda-setting power of the General Assembly.

- **UN Secretariat: A potentially powerful ally**

The Secretary General

Interviewees noted that, as the head of the UN Secretariat, the Secretary-General has *considerable* agenda-setting power and *some* power to influence how and whether Member States act on recommendations:

- (1) The Secretary-General can influence what Member States focus on during a given period by calling for thematic Summits.

For example, in calling for the 2022 Transforming Education Summit, the Secretary-General encouraged all Member States, to greater or lesser degrees, to review their progress on the Sustainable Development Goal 4: “Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all”.

The Secretary-General also outlines the UN Secretariat’s plans during an annual “priorities speech” delivered at the beginning of the year. This influences what civil society organisations choose to focus on each year, since they are more likely to prioritize moments or issues that have the attention of the Secretary-General.

- (2) The Secretary-General can influence how Member States act on recommendations by setting up advisory bodies that reporting directly to them and/or to Member States.

An example of this power is the recently established High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism, which developed recommendations for the Secretary-General and Member States on how to make the most of the upcoming Summit of the Future. The Secretary-General can also scrutinise Member States who fail to act on recommendations. But this is only effective if those Member States are sensitive to international scrutiny or pressure.

Positions bound to certain individuals, such as the Secretary-General and the President of the General Assembly, make it difficult to forecast support for citizen participation. Generally, the interviewees thought the Secretary-General would likely welcome citizen participation at the UN but warned that this would depend on Member State preferences. After all, as one interviewee put it, “the Secretary-General is the quintessential global citizen, but [their] salary is paid by Member States.” The Executive Office of the Secretary-General can also inform the Secretary-General’s support.

Department of Global Communications

The official mission of the Department of Global Communications is to “tell the UN story in many languages, powered across platforms”. In theory, therefore, the department does not have much power to agenda-set, include or exclude stakeholders, or act on recommendations at the UN.

However, the Department of Global Communications is one of the only interfaces between the UN and non-state actors. Interviewees argued that this gives it a substantial degree of hidden power, but also makes it a natural ally to initiatives promoting citizen participation. For example, the Civil Society Unit within the Department of Global Communications frequently pushes for greater civil society and youth engagement at multiple UN convenings, including the 2023 Sustainable Development Goals Summit. This indirectly affects the agenda of these convenings. Additionally, a Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) within the Civil Society Unit can accredit civil society organisations to participate in specific UN convenings.

This Department also chooses what issues will be spotlighted at the UN at a given moment (most notably through their thirteen UN Messengers of Peace and UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors)¹². This could have an influence on the priorities of state and non-state actors alike.

- **Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC): Power to include and exclude**

While ECOSOC operates under the overall authority of the General Assembly, it has little agenda-setting power of its own. This Council’s power lies in its “accreditation process”, which grants civil society organisations “consultative status” with the UN. This ultimately determines whose voices are heard or not heard at the UN. Only organisations that have “been in existence...for two years, have an established headquarters, a democratically-adopted constitution, authority to speak for [their] members, a representative structure, appropriate

¹² UN Messengers of Peace are distinguished individuals appointed by the UN Secretary-General to focus worldwide attention on the work of the UN. They include notorious individuals such as Leonardo DiCaprio and Malala Yousafzai. UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors are appointed by UNICEF awareness and mobilize support to address the challenges facing children worldwide. They include notorious individuals such as Priyanka Chopra and Vanessa Nakate.

mechanisms of accountability, and democratic and transparent decision making processes” are eligible for consultative status. This may pose barriers for some organisations interested in promoting citizen participation at the UN.

- **Civil Society Organisations (CSOs): The challenge of power disparity**

Civil society organisations are a part of created or invited spaces as permitted by their ECOSOC or NGLS accreditation status. Their role can be limited to providing input and documentation of violations to UN-related agreements or commitments (influence in agenda-setting) or generating actionable recommendations (holding Member States to account).

Despite the power asymmetry between Member States and CSOs, the latter may have significant hidden and invisible power. For example, one interviewee recalled their experience with a CSO, which influenced the language used in one of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The organisation’s capacity for documentation and research was used to make evidence-based arguments against SDG negotiators. Moreover, one interviewee argued that organisations such as WWF and Save the Children function as an “implementing arm” of the UN. Similarly, organisations such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International continue to document and call out Member States for failing to take action on UN resolutions.

However, there is a considerable power disparity among CSOs. Interviewees noted that the organising partners of the Major Groups have more agenda-setting power than most other CSOs: they are often the first port of call for Member States or UN staff members who want to consult international civil society. Similarly, CSOs with greater financial resources, i.e. those based in the Global North, tend to have greater possibilities to influence agenda-setting.

Given the extent of some CSOs’ power, some opposition among them toward citizen participation initiatives at the UN would not be unexpected. These CSOs’ long-standing role as representatives of the world's citizens could be challenged by innovations that bring citizens directly to the UN. In some respect, as one interviewee noted, CSOs’ advocacy at the UN is inaccessible to lay citizens. The simplest barrier is language, which can be exclusionary and jargon-heavy.

Despite concerns about gatekeeping, there was a consensus amongst interviewees that most CSOs are likely to support citizen participation initiatives. Critical to pitching any new initiatives, interviewees noted, is to stress how they may complement existing efforts. The following civil society organizations were recognised as potential supporters:

- Organizations involved in the **1 for 8 Billion** campaign, especially Amnesty International, AVAAZ, CIVICUS, Global Policy Forum, and the World Federalist Movement.
- Organisations convening the **We the Peoples** campaign, namely Democracy Without Borders, CIVICUS, and Democracy International.
- Organisers of the **Global People's Assembly** – the annual culmination of a series of National People's Assemblies designed to provide a space for civil society organizations to mobilise – and especially Forus International.
- **Coalition for the UN We Need** – a network of civil society organizations committed to transforming the UN and promoting people-centred multilateralism.
- **United Nations Associations** – over 100 national members of a World Federation of United Nations committed to strengthening the UN by engaging global citizens.
- Youth-led civil society organizations e.g., Restless Development.
- Faith-based civil society organizations e.g., the Quakers or the Baha'i International Community.

- **Think Tanks: Power of expert recommendations**

Think tanks regularly put forward recommendations for UN organisations to consider. Like civil society organisations, this gives them power to shape agendas at the UN. Interviewees noted that some Think Tanks –either due to historical or financial prestige or through active engagement with civil society– have more influence than others. Examples include the Centre on International Cooperation, Crisis Group, the United Nations Foundation, United Nations University, the Stimson Centre and –not strictly a Think Tank– the Academic Council on the United Nations System.

Interviewees also highlighted Global Nation and Earth4All (a research collective rather than a think tank), not so much for their power, but for their clear support for citizen participation at the UN.

- **Private Sector Organisations: The entangled power of profit and philanthropy**

Interviewees argued that the way in which private sector organisations generally engage with the UN is sporadic, making their agenda-setting power limited. For example, one interviewee noted that although a few private sector organisations regularly engage with the UN through the Major Group for Business and Industry, many more only engage with the UN on an annual basis during Global Weeks – a week to raise awareness and accountability for the SDGs coordinated by the United Nations Development Programme, Project Everyone and the UN Foundation.

Notably, two interviewees suggested that the Strategic Partnership Framework agreed between the UN and the World Economic Forum in 2019 might create space for more consistent engagement. One interviewee also pointed out that some private sector individuals have significant hidden power at the UN (e.g. George Soros, who funds Open Society Foundations). These observations do not, however, challenge the idea that the private sector generally holds little agenda-setting power at the UN.

Opinions about whether private sector actors would support citizen participation at the UN were mixed. One interviewee noted that Klaus Schwab, the current chairperson of the World Economic Forum, has previously expressed his support¹³. Most interviewees, however, suggested that private sector organisations could not reliably be counted upon to support initiatives promoting citizen participation at the UN. Indeed, the interests of private sector organisations were generally deemed to be “unpredictable” because they are ultimately answerable to their shareholders and “poorly understood” by their non private sector counterparts.

¹³ See: <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/citizens-assemblies-can-help-save-the-world-order/>.

- **Individuals: Hidden power of former Heads of State and Goodwill Ambassadors**

Some individuals hold considerable hidden and agenda-setting power. Interviewees suggested that many of these individuals would be broadly supportive of “any initiative to reinvigorate the multilateral system”. Some examples include:

- **The Elders:** Founded by Nelson Mandela and joins a group of global leaders working for peace, justice and human rights. Some members of the group, such as Mary Robinson¹⁴, Helen Clark¹⁵, and Ricardo Lagos¹⁶ have previously signalled their support for citizen participation.
 - **Club de Madrid:** Founded by Mikhail Gorbachev and joins former heads of states for democracy promotion.
 - **UN Messengers of Peace:** Prominent public figures appointed by the UN Secretary-General to focus worldwide attention on the work of the UN. Jane Goodall, who has been a Messenger of Peace since 2002, delivered a closing address to the 2022 Citizens’ Assembly on Biodiversity Loss¹⁷.
 - **UNICEF Goodwill Ambassadors:** Prominent public figures appointed by UNICEF to raise awareness and mobilize support to address the challenges facing children worldwide.
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- **Platforms: Prospects of activating global citizenship**

Interviewees underlined the hidden power of a number of “platforms” or spaces or organisations that provide a voice for civil society organisations and that, in doing so, indirectly shape agendas at the UN. Examples with agenda-setting power include Pass Blue, Project Everyone, and Global Citizen. Notably, several interviewees suggested that Global Citizen would likely be particularly supportive of initiatives to promote citizen participation at the UN since they could help to build a stronger sense of global citizenship amongst participants and observers, which is one of this organization’s key goals.

¹⁴ See: <https://www.greeneconomycoalition.org/news-and-resources/kumi-naidoo-mary-robinson-in-conversation-on-eco-social-contracts>;

¹⁵ See: <https://twitter.com/HelenClarkNZ/status/1320654056646295554>

¹⁶ See: <https://www.noemamag.com/the-next-steps-for-chile/>

¹⁷ See: <https://www.thejournal.ie/citizens-assembly-final-meeting-jane-goodall-5930019-Nov2022/>

Recommendations

The findings above speak to likely levels of support for non-specific initiatives to promote citizen participation at the UN. Some insights from these findings are specifically relevant to the community of practice interested in organising global citizens' assemblies connected to the UN. These insights can be compiled into five key recommendations as follows:

- 1. Develop a clear theory of change to ensure that assemblies are impact-driven.** A clear theory of change assures stakeholders that assemblies will not be reduced to one-off, tokenistic initiatives. This can garner sustained support, including from funders, keep organisers focused, and equip assembly members to hold organisers accountable.
- 2. Build a movement around assemblies.** Global citizens' assemblies are unlikely to receive a formal mandate from the UN in the near future. In the absence of such a mandate, the impact of a global citizens' assembly will depend on its normative power. This power could be amplified by building networks of actors and developing communications strategies that leverage key platforms before, during, and after the assemblies.
- 3. Fundraise for impact as well as delivery.** The costs of building a movement around global citizens' assemblies are likely to be high. Organisers should consider fundraising for activities designed to drive impact from the outset.
- 4. Ensure assemblies produce relevant and actionable recommendations.** Direct citizen participation at the UN is a novel concept. A global citizens' assembly designed to be impactful needs to demonstrate that it can concretely answer questions of relevance to the UN.
- 5. Advocate that global citizens' assemblies are a way to enhance rather than undermine the power of actors operating in and around the UN system.** Initiatives perceived to challenge status quo risk being blocked. Organisers can mitigate this risk by positioning global citizens' assemblies as aids to future ambitions. For example, Member States can use global assemblies to create a more inclusive multilateral system. Or they can be seen as a mechanism for the Secretary-General to generate momentum around particular issues. They can also be part of a wider civil society movement calling for more inclusive global governance.



Outlook

Key insights and findings developed in this technical paper have two limitations that open opportunities for further research. First, these insights are based on interviews with seven individuals. The small number of interviewees and their relatively similar experiences means this paper is not exempt from data and information gaps. Second, because the concept of direct citizen participation at the UN level is in its nascent stages, interviewees' responses regarding their support for initiatives to promote citizen participation at the UN were somewhat speculative. Based on these limitations, there are four directions for further research to better connect global citizens' assemblies with the UN system:

1. **Research into the interests of private sector organisations that engage with the UN.** Interviewees noted that the interests of private sector organisations are “poorly understood”. Given growing concern over the “corporate capture” of UN processes such as COPs, it is important that this gap in our understanding is addressed.
2. **Systematically mapping the understanding of direct citizen participation within the UN system.** Given the speculative nature of responses about support for citizen participation, direct research is needed with all the different groups of actors within the UN system to understand whether, and how, they conceive of citizen participation at the UN level. It may be worth repeating a similar power mapping exercise in a few years. Actors operating in and around the UN system might become more familiar with direct citizen participation. This exercise could also serve as a broad assessment of the mid-term impact of current initiatives to promote citizen participation at the UN.
3. **Further research into how to build a movement around a global citizens' assembly.** Given the limited number of global (or transnational) assembly case studies, it may be necessary to extrapolate learnings from local and national citizens' assemblies.
4. **Assessing support for of global citizens' assemblies on global governance.** This Technical Paper assumes that global citizens' assemblies are normatively desirable. Future research can interrogate this assumption about perceptions around global citizens' assemblies.

Such research can inform the efforts of global citizens' assemblies advocates.

Appendix

Appendix 1: UN Initiatives to Engage with Citizens

Over the last two decades, multiple initiatives have been launched by the UN to gather input from “We the Peoples”. Whilst “We the Peoples” has largely been taken to mean civil society at the UN, some initiatives have called for direct input from citizens. Some of the most well-known and wide-reaching of these initiatives are included in the following non-exhaustive list.

1 for 8 Billion Campaign (2014 - present)

The Campaign calls an “open, inclusive, and merit-based selection process” through ten reforms to democratise the process for selecting the UN Secretary-General. Many cite the campaign as a key reason for Guterres’ appointment as Secretary-General in 2016. The Campaign was notably founded by 13 of the world’s largest and well-established civil society organizations: Amnesty International, Center of Concern, CIVICUS, Equality Now, FEMNET (African Women’s Development and Communication Network), Forum-Asia, Global Policy Forum, Committee for Nuclear Policy, Social Watch, Third World Network, UBUNTU-World Forum of Civil Society Networks, Women’s Environment and Development Organization, and the World Federalist Movement-Institute for Global Policy.

UN75 Initiative (2020)

The UN75 Initiative was a “global conversation” organised to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the United Nations where 1.5 million people participated . The initiative was endorsed by the General Assembly (Resolution 73/299) and received voluntary funding and delivery assistance from Member States. It involved a short survey that could be accessed online, disseminated via SMS or used to collect data in person; physical, phone and online dialogues; formal polling in 50 states; analysis of print, broadcast, online and social media in 70 states, and mapping of research publications.

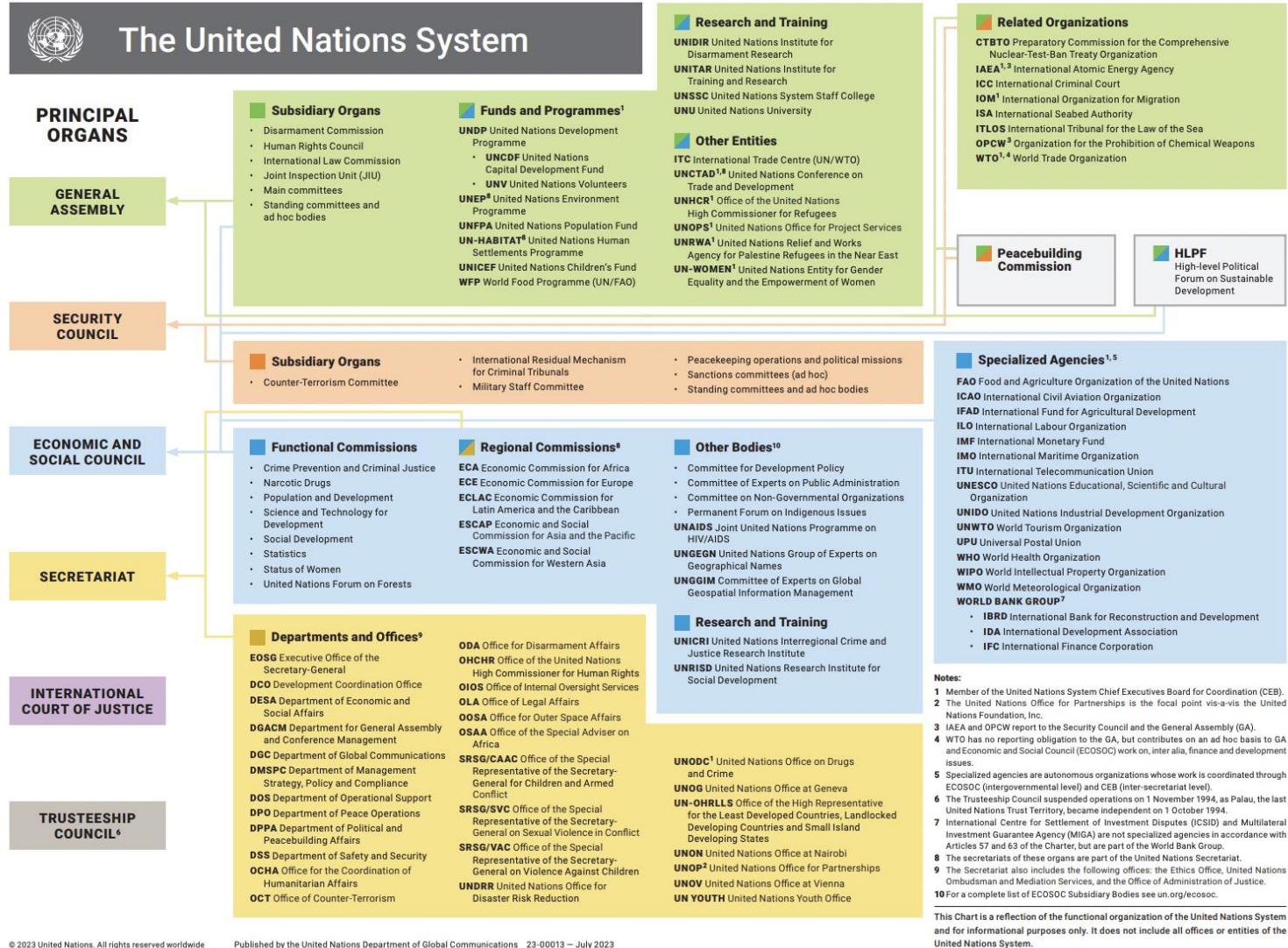
MYWorld Survey (2014 - present)

The MYWorld Survey is “global citizen survey” led by the United Nations and partner organisations on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). When the survey was first launched, almost 10 million people from 194 countries voted to help define the SDGs. It continues to be available for anyone to have their say on SDG achievement.

U-Report (2011 - present)

U-Report is “UNICEF’s flagship digital platform”. It works as a tool to share information, collect quantifiable data, and raise awareness on issues that impact children and young people, especially the most vulnerable. In theory, it can have a tangible impact on their lives, since received responses are analysed in real time and displayed on a public dashboard accessible to local and national-decision makers. There have been close to 500,000 reports this year (time of writing is November 2023).

Appendix 2: UN System Chart



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Ethics declaration

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