

Governing Global Deliberation

Can a global citizens' assembly be governed democratically?

Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN)
Research × Practice Exchange No. 2/2025

Rikki Dean
University of Southampton (United Kingdom)

Flynn Devine
Boundary Object Studio (United Kingdom)

Melisa Ross
Universität Bremen (Germany)



Highlights

The Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN) hosted a four-part Seminar Series in June 2024 to foster meaningful exchange between researchers and practitioners. We invited speakers to engage with bold and often challenging questions around realising public deliberation in global and transnational settings. This *Research × Practice Exchange* series captures the insights and energy of these conversations, continuing the dialogue beyond each seminar. The second session featured Rikki Dean, Flynn Devine, and Melisa Ross, who reflected on Governing Global Deliberation:

THE PROMPT

Can, and should, the principles of deliberative democracy be applied to how global citizens' assemblies are organised?

Three main ideas emerged from the discussion:

Governing deliberation should be measured against deliberative principles Effectiveness, accountability, and greater equality should be pursued not only at the 'frontstage' of participation, but also in the 'backstage' of organising citizens' assemblies. It brings substantive advantages with regard to better informing processes and adapting to global contexts.

The challenge is balancing values with practicability Diverse cultural and political settings challenge equal engagement for governance stakeholders. There may be a tradeoff between more diversity and inclusivity in the governance of citizens' assemblies, and the capacity of stakeholders across the world to effectively engage to the same extent. Over-bureaucratisation should not be the result of more deliberative governance.

Spotlighting the backstage Each transnational and global assembly may need to clarify what constitutes a fair answer to the question: who makes decisions, and why?

The Backstage of Deliberations

Existing research on citizens' assemblies and participatory processes has focused much more on what happens within the processes than on the backstage politics of how these assemblies are organised. Substantial questions need to be answered concerning how we govern assemblies properly, the challenges this raises, and how we can deal with them. We must think more about governance and map the most important considerations in governing participatory-deliberative processes.

How are citizens' assemblies run? And is there a specifically global dimension to these governance challenges? Most examples of citizens' assemblies are on the local or national level, and our understanding of how to organise comes from these contexts¹. But does what we have learned capture all the challenges of conducting a global assembly, which brings together people from very different social and economic contexts, speaking a variety of languages, and where key stakeholders may bring different kinds of ideas about what the deliberation should do? How do we manage these unique challenges of transnational deliberation?

There are also several pragmatic challenges to consider in relation to implementing 'best practices.' These include the political constraints around generating broad-based support for the process. Organising these kinds of processes can be a bit of an uphill battle. There may be resistance from those who potentially hold the power to make assemblies happen. Organisers and promoters of citizens' assemblies must respond to realities on the ground, and devoting reflection time and resources to governance may scare off potential funders, backers and public officials. To what extent, then, should governance concerns be traded off against the 'realpolitik' of making the assembly happen at all?

¹ Boswell, J., Dean, R., & Smith, G. (2023). Integrating citizen deliberation into climate governance: Lessons on robust design from six climate assemblies. *Public Administration*, 101(1), 182-200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/padm.12883>

This points to another constraint: governance has budgetary implications. This came through clearly in a Technical Paper published by GloCAN,² where we compared assemblies in Europe, Latin America and East Asia operating with very different budgets. At opposite ends of the spectrum, the French Climate Convention had a budget of approximately five million euros. In contrast, the Bogotá's Itinerant Citizens' Assembly in Colombia had a budget of around ten thousand dollars. The budget size naturally affects the extent to which governance procedures can, and perhaps should, be implemented. Should governance structures be flexibly matched to budgetary constraints, or should there be a minimum budget to guarantee good governance?

The politics of organisation also highlights the importance of governance practices in supporting the external legitimacy of assemblies, which has tended to be neglected in favour of thinking about the quality of the process for those participating. Citizen assemblies had various practices, like ethics boards, responding to different aspects of the integrity of the process, but mostly on internal issues: do the citizens feel safe in the space? do they have someone or somewhere to place complaints? etc. In our Technical Paper, we couldn't locate any examples of deep thinking about how to institute a robust process for responding to complaints from outside stakeholders, e.g. if someone claimed that the process is illegitimate in one way or another. This may be a symptom of citizens' assemblies often being conceived in quite a technocratic way, although they are always an intervention into politics.

There will always be actors who aren't on board, who want to challenge the legitimacy of this process. And if organisers can't convincingly respond to their critiques, showing they had internal procedures and guarantees in place that ensured the integrity of the process, it can actually damage the assemblies' potential impact later down the line, because it just becomes easier for the actors who aren't on board to delegitimise the process and the recommendations that came out of it. Understanding what constitutes good

² Rikki Dean, Alan Marx, Indira Latorre, Santiago Niño, Felipe Rey, Su Yun Woo and Ming Zhuang (2024) Spotlighting the Backstage Governance of Citizens' Assemblies: Lessons from East Asia, Europe and Latin America. Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN) Technical Paper No. 1/2024. Available at: <http://glocan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Technical-Paper-1-2024-Dean-et-al.pdf>

governance for citizens' assemblies is therefore essential in securing their legitimacy for the long term.

Rikki Dean

University of Southampton & Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN)

Associate Professor in Politics and Co-Director of the Centre for Democratic Futures. Currently leads the Integrating Citizen Deliberation for Impact (i4i) Project, funded by the German, Polish and Belgian Science Foundations, as well as the ERC-funded project Political Process Preferences in Europe (PoPPiE): Rethinking Conceptual, Ontological and Methodological Foundations, and is Co-Investigator on the INSPIRE project.



Embodying what we preach

Mirroring the governance the world needs?

Can global deliberation be organised democratically? I've thought a lot about this process during my experience organising the world's first Global Citizens' Assembly.³ However, I couldn't help feeling that this question leaves much to be implied. Most importantly, what makes something 'democratic' at all.

The average person on the street pictures a ballot box when someone talks about democracy, but someone from the 'deliberative democracy bubble' likely pictures something quite different. Most notably, there's often a consensus within this ecosystem that 'good' democracy should focus on deep deliberation over shallower preference sharing like voting. There should be meaningful periods of engagement with an array of relevant information before any final decisions are shared, instead of engaging based on one's own explorations of a topic or personal experience. There may be an emphasis on the need for the most affected group, or some form of demographically representative sample,⁴ to have a larger portion of the say rather than a self-selected group of whoever turns up.

There are plenty of valid reasons for these beliefs, many of which I buy into myself, but they raise questions around whose standards we're using as the baseline for such propositions. Therefore, when asking if global deliberation can be organised democratically, I would argue that there is actually an implicit question behind the question that we are more interested in: must the governance of participatory processes embody the very democratic values these processes aspire to promote in wider society? Must we, in other words, act as we preach?

³ See: <https://globalassembly.org>

⁴ See: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/sortition>

Historically, the norm for most participatory processes—from the town hall to the citizens’ assembly—has been top-down governance. A group of experts decides what should happen and when, inviting citizens into the process once the agendas have been set and the methodology has been finalised. This mirrors the traditions of much modern political decision-making: ideas created by academics delivered by parliamentary houses, later analysed by think tanks and journalists. If classical democratic standards were enough, these mainstream methods would not result necessarily undemocratic. In the case of policymaking, or even most modern participatory processes, there are publicly appointed and accountable officials involved in the planning and/or delivery. However, they largely fail to embody the vision⁵ laid out by many supporters of a more deliberative democracy.



At the global level, there is no caucus for the global public, no world government, and forums of international governance only loosely held together

If expertise or elections aren’t enough to validate someone being at the helm of designing and delivering processes, and instead we’re opting for something more representative and deliberative, there are no immediate answers available. When it comes to organising global deliberations, however, we should focus primarily on three key areas:

- 1. Initiating** Who has the right to decide a process should be run, choose what it must focus on, and decide what kind of process is best? (If not the government, who?)
- 2. Organising** How is the organising team chosen, acknowledging the influence they have on what a process looks like and, subsequently, how outputs might manifest? (If not based on expertise, then judged by what metric?)

⁵ See for instance: ‘Simon Burall’s Thoughts for Democracy’, Involve, 24 October 2024. Available at: <https://involve.org.uk/news-opinion/opinion/simon-buralls-thoughts-democracy>

3. Operating How are decisions made, overseen, and enforced within the organising of a process? (If not by organisers or government, then by what body?)

This becomes especially challenging at the global scale. At a local level, it is reasonably easy for a deliberative process to interface with the local public and its existing institutions. But at the global level, there is no caucus for the global public, no world government, and forums of international governance only loosely held together. This is before we even consider the complex issues of geopolitical power imbalance, operating in multiple languages, and navigating vast political and cultural diversity.

I have full faith that we could iterate to create global deliberations that edge closer and closer towards a standard of governance that would make even the most ideological practitioner proud. Democracy itself is one long experiment that has yet to be ‘solved’ anywhere or at any level (and maybe it never can/should be). We should, therefore, view this exploration as one joint element of this overarching journey. As a start, however, we must make the standards we want to pursue explicit in our questions.

“We must not let the perfect of ideal internal governance be the enemy of the good that these processes could play

At this point, one thing feels very clear to me. Whilst we build this thinking up, we must keep moving forward on the larger mission. If global deliberations really could play a role in countering some of the crises we face as a species,⁶ then we must be careful not to let the perfect of ideal internal governance be the enemy of the good that these processes could play more widely. Although I believe in working towards ideals, I also believe in action, and I believe in experimentation.

⁶ Mellier, C. and Capstick, S. (2024) CAST Guidelines: How can citizens’ assemblies help navigate the systemic transformations required by the polycrisis? Available at: <https://cast.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/the-centre-for-climate-change-and-social-transformations-cast-guidelines-how-can-citizens-assemblies-help-navigate-the-systemic-transformations-required-by-the-polycrisis.pdf>

Flynn Devine

Boundary Object Studio

Political scientist and technologist who co-directs Boundary Object Studio, where he works on AI governance and design. Before this, he was first hire at the Collective Intelligence Project, staff at the Alan Turing Institute, and advisor to bodies like the OECD. He was part of the initiating team of the 2021 Global Assembly.



Governance as Values

Deliberative democracy within

Why does governance matter? When we speak about the internal governance of citizens' assemblies, we consider how they're initiated, how they're organised, who makes decisions and allocates resources, how deliberations are designed. There are at least two reasons why considering these questions matters.

The first reason is accountability. When a citizens' assembly is set up, participants are asked to contribute their time, resources, commitment, and epistemic and affective labour. Asking this of assembly members may appear extractive unless the organisers can offer something in return.⁷ What citizens' assemblies offer is, ideally, a space that allows assembly members to exchange with others, a setting where they are equal, where their contributions are valued, where they are safe and no harm comes to them. Creating this setting—the assembly—requires close collaboration between the stakeholders behind the process: to ensure the process fulfils its purpose in a way that creates a meaningful experience for participants and, ideally, produces generative output for broader publics. Governance structures create that relationship of accountability between organisers, assembly members, and the public or institutional conversation the citizens' assembly is 'docking' into.

The second reason is effectiveness. Transnational deliberative processes, like other citizens' assemblies, can be initiated by a number of stakeholders in a number of ways. They may be commissioned top-down by a public institution, like the European Commission commissions the European Citizens' Panels⁸; they may emerge 'bottom-up' led by civil society and practitioners, like the Global Assembly⁹ or the Democratic Odyssey¹⁰. Either way, organisers

⁷ Morán, A. and Ross, M. (2021). Can Deliberation Overcome its Extractivist Tendencies?. *Deliberative Democracy Digest*, 07 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.publicdeliberation.net/can-deliberation-overcome-its-extractivist-tendencies/>

⁸ See: https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/european-citizens-panels_en

⁹ See: <https://globalassembly.org/>

¹⁰ See: <https://democraticodyssey.eui.eu/home>

cooperate with a range of stakeholders to make the assembly happen, which requires coordination across time zones, regions, and languages. The Global Assembly in particular clearly exemplifies the many people, roles, and responsibilities that can be involved in a citizens' assembly: the Central Circle of initiators collaborated with over 400 individuals across the world, including regional coordinators (Cluster Facilitators), local organizations (Community Hosts), Facilitators, Notetakers, Translators, and others¹¹. These stakeholders were involved, in different combinations, in the commissioning, designing, and delivering of the Global Assembly. Governance structures determine how those many stakeholders will work together, establishing horizontal and vertical relations of duty and responsibility among stakeholders to ensure the goals of the process are achieved.

How can transnational and global citizens' assemblies be run in a way that is both effective and accountable? What does that entail? In our prior research for GloCAN,¹² we led focus group discussions and interviewed individuals who took on many of those different roles. Among our many findings, two ideas speak to this Exchange's prompt—what happens when we think about governance following the values and principles that inspire deliberation?



Stakeholders, like assembly members, come from highly unequal backgrounds; those inequalities don't disappear simply by wishing them away

First, what is specific about global deliberation is also specific about governing global deliberation. Transnational and global citizens' assemblies are such not only because of their participants' nationalities, but also due to the nature of issues under discussion. Global problems, in substance and consequence, should be tackled by global communities: the climate crisis, AI development,

¹¹ Global Assembly Team (2022) Report of the 2021 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis. Available at: <https://globalassembly.org/report.html>

¹² Melisa Ross, Hazel Jovita, and Lucas Veloso (2023) Effective and Accountable Governance of Global Citizens' Assemblies: Challenges, Responses, and Recommendations from the 2021 Global Assembly. Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN) Technical Paper No. 1/2023. Available at: <http://glocan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Technical-Paper-1-2023-Ross-et-al.pdf>

but also migration or security, are of relevance well beyond national borders. The problems are global in scale and so should be the deliberations.¹³ This line of thought reflects the ‘all affected’ principle, which states that everybody who’s affected by a problem should have a say in how it’s tackled. But global problems affect communities quite differently. Consequently, some researchers are reflecting over whether a ‘most affected’ principle should instead define whether some voices should be heard more than others in issues that affect them more deeply¹⁴.

While the ‘all affected’ and ‘most affected’ principles are often discussed with regard to participants, I wonder whether they shouldn’t also apply to organisers, designers, and deliverers of citizens’ assemblies. Stakeholders, like assembly members, come from different, highly unequal backgrounds and contexts; those inequalities don’t disappear simply by wishing them away or ‘manifesting’ deliberative values¹⁵. In our GloCAN research, we found overt power hierarchies in who can commission and deliver such processes, who has access to funders and infrastructure, and who has a financial need to deliver work in order to ensure the subsistence of their organisation. Such unequal starting points invite reflection as to how governance arrangements should reflect, or counteract, those imbalances.

Second, the main governance challenge is adaptation across contexts. For instance, in our research about the Global Assembly, we found that community hosts—local local organisations conducting recruitment and supporting assembly members in each of the 100 places selected for participation—had never heard about sortition before. When they joined the process, they received instructions on how to conduct recruitment, but often these instructions were inapplicable in their context. Emerging research is showing that, indeed, the same street or door-to-door recruitment strategy devised for Brussels cannot be implemented in Caracas, Aleppo, or Manila¹⁶. Valid concerns were raised from

¹³ Dryzek, J. S., Bächtiger, A., & Milewicz, K. (2011). Toward a deliberative global citizens’ assembly. *Global Policy*, 2(1), 33-42.

¹⁴ Afsahi, A. (2022). Towards a principle of most-deeply affected. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 48(1), 40-61.

¹⁵ Curato, N., Hammond, M., & Min, J. B. (2019). *Power in deliberative democracy*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁶ Curato, N., & Calamba, S. (2024). Deliberative forums in fragile contexts: Challenges from the field. *Politics*, 02633957241259090. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957241259090>

local stakeholders expected to conduct recruitment in places where civic registers are incomplete, where it is unsafe to speak to unknown people on the streets, or where socio-demographic markers do not necessarily apply in such a straightforward manner or do not reflect the way local culture and communities experience and represent their intersectional identities¹⁷. While community hosts were given leeway in terms of ensuring their own safety and reaching out to potential participants in their own places of community and encounter, broader questions remain as to who decides what constitutes ‘random enough,’ who mandates standards, and who assesses ‘good practice.’



The main governance challenge is adaptation across contexts

Ultimately, the answers to these questions will depend greatly on who has a seat at the table when commissioning, designing, and delivering happen. Our prior and ongoing research shows there is value in extending deliberative principles of inclusion and equality in participation also to governance stakeholders. However, these considerations may also ‘bureaucratise’ and complicate processes that are, in themselves, already fairly complex and costly to set up, and which remain fairly marginal in the global and transnational governance landscape. Less democratic forces operating in those arenas are not concerned with ensuring inclusion and equality within; to some extent, such considerations may represent a competitive disadvantage for actors who promote deliberation as a democratising force in transnational and global governance.

And yet, if deliberative democracy is more than a method, if it is indeed a political project, then the values it carries should not only appear as part of the visible frontstage, but also inform the backstage¹⁸ and relationships that sustain deliberative processes.

¹⁷ Veloso, L., Curato, N., Ross, M., & Morán, A. (2025). Vulnerability is not a checklist: Grounded Normative Theory in global deliberation. *Qualitative Research*, 14687941251341997.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/14687941251341997>

¹⁸ See: Parry, L. J., & Curato, N. (2024). Deliberative Integrity: Risks and Responses in Mini-Public Governance. University of Canberra. Available at:

https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/files/106351019/Report_Deliberative_Integrity.pdf

Melisa Ross

Universität Bremen & Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN)

Postdoctoral researcher at SOCIUM Research Center on Inequality, Co-Lead of the Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN), and Co-Chair of ECPR's Standing Group on Democratic Innovations. She studies democratic innovations and deliberation in Latin America and Europe. She was co-evaluator of the 2021 Global Citizens' Assembly.





Acknowledgments

This Research x Practice Exchange was produced following Session #2 of GloCAN's Seminar Series 'Realising Global Public Deliberation', which took place in June 2024. The session is available online following this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mGL-9AXGOVk>

The Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN) thanks Peter Stone, Yago Bermejo, Claire Mellier, and all other attendees to our second Seminar Series on Realising Global Public Deliberation for their constructive comments and insightful questions that have helped further develop these reflections.

The authors thank Melisa Ross, Nicole Curato, and Franziska Maier for their editorial support.

Cite text as

Rikki Dean, Flynn Devine, and Melisa Ross (2025) Governing Global Deliberation. Can a global citizens' assembly be governed democratically? *GloCAN Research × Practice Exchange* No. 2/2025. Available at: <https://glocan.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/GloCAN-Exchange-2-Governing.pdf>

Funding declaration

The authors received no external funding.