Grounding Global Deliberation

How can global citizens' assemblies connect to local contexts?

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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 third session featured Lucas Veloso, Susan Lee, and Andrea Felicetti, who reflected on Grounding Global Deliberation:

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Can global citizens' assemblies foster connections between assembly members and their communities?

Three main ideas emerged from the discussion:

Grounding can happen throughout the deliberative process For instance: adapting recruitment methods to local constraints, responding to the diversity of stakeholders involved in governance, adapting information materials and protocols, providing tailored assembly member support, and connecting outcomes for amplified impact.

Grounding improves Assembly Members' experience Assembly Members participate as individuals and as community members. Grounding deliberations in their realities acknowledges their background and networks and speaks to their lived experience. Bringing social actors into global citizens' assemblies may also be beneficial to those actors, but this remains to be seen.

Grounding may raise normative and practical concerns These include malpractice, deviation from quality standards, lack of accountability, fostering shallow instead of meaningful long-term connection, and rejection by locally mobilised actors.

Connecting 'glocal' assemblies

Citizens' assemblies are democratic innovations based on civic lottery, or sortition—a process that draws individuals from a demographically representative pool. However, critical voices have highlighted concerns about the normative and practical dimensions of this seemingly 'individualized' form of representation and participation, arguing that many communities worldwide cannot conceive of an individual serving as their representative while remaining disconnected from their realities and unaccountable to their needs and perspectives.

In GloCAN's third Seminar Series session, we pondered whether transnational movements may offer valuable lessons in this respect. The 2021 Global Assembly[1] already innovated in the design of transnational deliberation by purposefully trying to promote decentralised global deliberation and connection with local contexts. They did so by promoting local community assemblies, locally organized events, running in parallel to the 'core assembly' in over 41 countries, leading local dialogues related to the broader global conversation on the climate and ecological crisis[2]. Yet, as a proof-of-concept, the 2021 Global Assembly did not further develop a model to integrate those community assemblies into the main events of this democratic innovation, the 'core assembly'. This gap emphasised the challenge of linking local deliberations to a central global process and the need to understand how local contexts can effectively inform global decision-making.

Initial research exploring this challenged was published by GloCAN under the title 'Embedding global citizens' assemblies: A bottom-up perspective from Mozambican rural communities'[3]. The paper draws on insights from interviews,

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[1] See: https://globalassembly.org/
[2] Global Assembly Team (2022) Report of the 2021 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis, Earth, pp. 181, 189. Available at https://globalassembly.org/report.html
[3] Available at: https://glocan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Technical-Paper-3-2023-Veloso-and-Luis.pdf

focus groups, and roundtables with activists from Zambezia, Mozambique, both involved and not involved in the 2021 Global Assembly, to uncover opportunities for connecting with existing participatory events, civil society efforts, and strategies to enhance local engagement and ensure lasting impact. Our research highlights missed opportunities in transnational citizens' assemblies, where only a few individuals participate while communities and local stakeholders, such as civil society organisations, are excluded despite having high stakes and leading previous and ongoing participatory efforts in the same policy issue the assembly may be tasked with discussing[4]. Existing evidence also shows the importance of linking deliberative forums to the broader public through measures like reporting and referenda[5]. At the same time, transnational deliberation implies complex collaborations across geographies and time zones, so that, by definition, processes are constrained in what they can achieve. And this comes on top of the usual constraints for citizens' assemblies, such as budgets, staff, and limitations in process design.

Grounding transnational deliberation in local contexts therefore raises multiple normative and political considerations: Why should global deliberation connect to local contexts? Who is intended to benefit from this connection? Does grounding in local contexts primarily serve the core process, and if so, does that risk being an 'extractive' approach? Should it benefit communities, and if so, is the core process relevant to this purpose at all? Can global deliberation better support existing mobilisations and civil society organisations working on the ground worldwide?

On a practical level, in turn, it bears further questions: Can local assemblies take place before the 'core' process to, for instance, generate the agenda? Can local assemblies select representatives to participate in the core assembly? Should local assemblies occur after the core process to translate findings and recommendations into the local context?

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[4] Curato, N., Luís, A., Ross, M., & Veloso, L. (2025). Just sortition, communitarian deliberation: Two proposals for grounded climate assemblies. Environmental Science & Policy, 168, 104070. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2025.104070
[5] Warren, M. E. & Pearse, H. (2008). Designing Deliberative Democracy: The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly. New York: Cambridge University Press.

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Lessons on Grounding
from the 2021 Global Assembly

The 2021 Global Assembly was the first deliberative mini-public implemented using global sortition. As part of the implementation team, we were confronted with questions of grounding both before and during deliberations in at least four ways.

The first way that the process was rooted in local contexts started with the recruitment of team personnel.[6] The first step of the Global Assembly was a location lottery that determined the 100 locations from which participants would come from. The second step was the establishment of 100 local organizations within a 200-kilometer radius of these selected points, designated as 'Community Hosts.' Each Community Host recruited, hosted, translated, and supported one Assembly Member through the 68 weeks of deliberations. The rationale for grounding hosting through local organisations was both functional and normative. On one hand, it was clear that support systems for each Assembly Member would have to be context-specific: embedded actors had to be enlisted to make discretionary choices at the frontline and 'translate' centrally established protocols for recruitment, translation, etc. in ways that resonated with the practicalities of each place. From a normative point of view, this approach was driven by a desire to empower the particularities of culture, literacy, or infrastructure at each locale, a mission that a central team from the minority world would no doubt falter in doing. In lieu of the 'UFO' trope of mini-publics where individuals are plucked out of their neighbourhoods into institutional conference rooms, Community Hosts were integrated to serve as familiar intermediaries into a global process.

Of course, the extent to which 'local organizations' were truly grounded in Assembly Members' communities varied, as some Members did not see their Hosts as sharing any sense of community membership—and vice versa. Further,

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[6] See: https://globalassembly.org/the-core-assembly.html

as external evaluators highlight[7], this model at times reproduced a 'politics-administration' dichotomy wherein founding members in the minority world set agendas and generated and distributed resources while Hosts around the world implemented this vision. During implementation, I can recall tensions between encouraging local discretion and maintaining uniformity, or between local autonomy and potential malpractice to Assembly Members were frequently discussed. To me, these outcomes reflect unresolved contradictions between the important task of grounding and mini-publics, a highly prescriptive methodology.

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The second way in which the Global Assembly was grounded happened before the deliberation started, in what we called Information Contextualization Events, where each of the Community Hosts were asked to organise and facilitate a local event that invited the Assembly Member, the street recruited participants who weren't selected by the second stage sortition, as well as members of the local community. The goal was to review the initial translation of the information materials that the Assembly Member would use during deliberations, adding local examples to the information package. This created better information materials, but also exposure to more examples of climate impact recognisable or relevant to Members. These events were designed to have the Assembly Member's community support and prepare the individual participant to embark upon what could be a very daunting task. For the community, these events offered a way for non-selected participants to engage with the process and spread awareness that someone from their community was about to embark on this journey.

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[7] Curato, N., Chalaye, P., Conway-Lamb, W., De Pryck, K., Elstub, S., Morán, A., Oppold, D., Romero, J., Ross, M., Sanchez, E., Sari, N., Stasiak, D., Tilikete, S., Veloso, L., von Schneidemesser, D., & Werner, H. (2023). Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis Evaluation Report. University of Canberra. Available at: https://researchprofiles.canberra.edu.au/en/publications/global-assembly-on-the-climate-and-ecological-crisis-evaluation-r

The third form of grounding happened during deliberations. The central question here is whether participants in a mini-public should be representatives of a larger group. We can imagine a menu of different degrees of linkage between the participant and their community—however defined—each with its pros and cons. In the Global Assembly, Assembly Members were recruited to 'represent' only their own lived experiences without expecting to be representatives of their communities. However, even with such parsimonious formal mandate, we recognised that in practice, individuals cannot be stripped of their contexts. Sortition selects an individual, but that individual carries broader cultures, life experiences, and internet connections that do not exist in a vacuum. These factors make their way into the forum, from Assembly Members' personal stories about their city, their grandparents, what their Zoom backdrop looks like, etc. In the 2021 Global Assembly, our_process design choices aimed to acknowledge and embrace, rather than overlook, the influence of local contexts in deliberations. One example is a supplemental exercise that visualised the differential impact that a 1.5-degree increase in global temperature would have across 100 points in the map. In breakout groups, Assembly Members were invited to zoom in on the five localities where that group's Members came from, to anchor their deliberations based on these local differences.

> **"** Individuals cannot be stripped of their contexts

Finally, the fourth way of grounding the Global Assembly was to support locally-driven Community Assemblies that individuals and groups around the world could initiate. These processes enabled greater flexibility for initiators to organize deliberations in ways that accorded with their specific contexts. However, Community Assemblies remained separate and disconnected from the Core Assembly. A future task is to imagine what kinds of transmissions can be fostered between a mini-public and other types of bottom-up, community-organised, or self-selected deliberations. For example, how can pre-deliberation events that activate community members in sortition-selected places be expanded into longer Community Assembly processes? Can existing, rather than new, spaces for talk or participation in those places assume this role, and

how should they be linked to the global 'core' mini-public in which one resident participates? Thinking in these systemic terms may alleviate some pressure in trying to achieve grounding solely within mini-publics, and instead promote thinking about combining methodologies with distinct strengths and weaknesses.

Susan Lee

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Master's student in Sociology at Stanford University. She was part of the 2021 Global Assembly team and collaborates with the World Citizens' Assembly Lab to prototype global deliberation methodologies. She also contributes to the Integrating Deliberation for Impact Project, researching how mini-publics can be embedded in political systems for greater impact.

Grounding Transnational Deliberation

Many challenges and a few solutions

Can Global Citizen Assemblies connect to local contexts? This might happen, though it seems a difficult objective.

We should seriously consider the possibility of not being able to connect. That doesn't mean citizen assemblies are destined to fail. But understanding whether and to what extent a connection can be established can help us determine what kind of citizen assembly we can develop, what objectives it can pursue, and what objectives it is better not to pursue.

Naturally, global citizens' assemblies can connect to local contexts at least in a 'shallow' way using random selection and inviting witnesses. However, we must consider a deeper, meaningful, and substantive connection that requires involvement with the social and political texture of local communities. It's not always possible for local citizens' assemblies to achieve that, and it may be more challenging for global citizens' assemblies.

Why is that the case? First, because often, the public is not asking for citizen assemblies. These forums are being offered by elite actors, whether from the government, academia, or the participation industry. Second, publics can oppose citizens' assemblies, for example when they have a participatory or an agonistic political culture that doesn't really appreciate the deliberative dimension in politics.

Still, there may be occasions where there is a public demand or receptiveness for citizens' assemblies. That may provide the more direct opportunity to involve local communities or civil society early on. Naturally, it's important to include publics in the governance of the assembly, give these actors a stake in the process and keep them engaged through the process. We've observed this

works well for some democratic innovations and favours implementation and impact[8].

Together with my colleague Federica Frazetta, we have studied civil society actors mobilised around the issue of genome editing around the world[9] in the context of the proposed Global Citizens' Assembly on Genome Editing.[10] We've found that many actors opposed genome editing and, therefore, were also very willing to discuss how it should be regulated. However, they were not so invested in the kind of process used to achieve this. They cared more about the final goal than the process. The good news for global deliberation on topics like the climate crisis is that environmental movements may be more supportive than what we've seen, for instance, with genome editing. However, potential synergies need to be explored further.

> " Lack of awareness or previous negative experiences with other democratic innovations may be an important motivation behind opposition

Why may publics oppose democratic innovations in general, and mini-publics in particular? It may have to do with a lack of awareness. If we take the case of Italy, which generally 'lags' behind in democratic innovation compared to other European countries, most likely, people won't know what a citizens' assembly is in the first place. This is not the case everywhere. In parts of the Global South, where many democratic innovations first emerged, publics may be more familiar with certain institutional designs. But lack of awareness or previous negative experiences with other democratic innovations may be an important motivation behind opposition.

[8] Della Porta, D., & Felicetti, A. (2022). Innovating democracy against democratic stress in Europe: Social movements and democratic experiments. *Representation,* 58(1), 67-84.

[9] Frazzetta, F., & Felicetti, A. (2025). Facing Democratic Challenges: The Role of Civil Society Organizations in the Governance of Genomic Technologies. *Perspectives on Politics,* 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592724001075

[10] See: https://www.globalca.org

Moreover, deciding whether to engage with institutions is always a difficult question for social movements and other organised actors. So, when asked to collaborate with a citizens' assembly, they may see this as a choice to collaborate with institutions, and it's not something they may easily agree to do. In this sense, lack of awareness goes some distance, but reticence may also be explained by people not wanting to support a process they were not involved in. In the case of genome editing, some powerful actors remain sceptical about the abilities of citizens to make certain judgements. Thus, extensive forms of participation tend to be based on a deficit model, in which participation should take place to inform citizens of things they don't yet know. And that's where it stops.[11]

Moreover, serious organisations and mobilised actors would like to win their battles, and democratic innovations are not necessarily the way to 'get things done' in that respect. There are no guarantees that it's 'worth the fight', if democratic innovations are perceived as distant, led by elite actors, and generally unknown. This points to a legitimacy deficit that mini-publics have with regard to local contexts. It's not a given that communities might benefit from citizens' assemblies. Maybe those already mobilised, for example, on climate issues, see a climate assembly as an opportunity to further their cause. But those mobilised against climate policies, for instance, are unlikely to engage with the assembly, bypassing it altogether.

" There are no ready-made 'local' communities

Most importantly, there are no ready-made 'local' communities—there are diverse actors with mobilised identities that are part of multiple, overlapping imagined and constructed communities.

Yet, if one manages to bring an empowered social actor into global deliberative assemblies, it brings legitimacy, originality, and political thinking. It can bring politics into this. But civil society cannot afford to experiment much. When they

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[11] Meyer, M., & Vergnaud, F. (2021). The geographies and politics of gene editing: Framing debates across seven countries. *Frontiers in Political Science, 3,* https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.731496

collaborate with other actors, they want to get things done. This urge to do politics can benefit highly abstract things like mini-publics. It can also bring on board a lot of 'red lights,' unless there is a truly open-ended processes. One has to be open to the 'zero' option, which makes the process necessarily more democratic.

Finally, transnational networking is of utmost importance. But connecting across different levels (for example, a global mini-public with local civil society) can also add to the burden and workload. What we have seen in prior research is that both adaptation and adoption are key mechanisms in the diffusion of mini-publics – and that learning from each other has been essential for extra-institutional actors[12].

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[12] Felicetti, A., & Della Porta, D. (2018). Between deliberation and contestation: The convergence of struggles against austerity and its world in the Nuit Debout movement. *Social Movement Studies, 17*(6), 658-675.

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