Docking Global Deliberation

How can global citizens' assemblies make an impact on global governance?

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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 fourth session featured Nicole Curato, Aishwarya Machani, and Antoine Vergne, who reflected on Docking Global Deliberation:

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How can global citizens' assemblies claim relevance in crowded policy arenas and contribute meaningfully in the policy vacuums of global governance?

Three main ideas emerged from the discussion:

Docking is a broad and generative category Docking can take multiple forms depending on which actors are leading, and what governance spaces are docked 'onto.' It is not equated to impact, but seeks instances where power or momentum can be garnered. Governments, civil society, international organizations, and global summits, all are relevant players and spaces.

Both 'high' and 'low' institutional docking foster a global participatory ecosystem Global citizens' assemblies create learnings for institutions, civil society, citizens, and governance spaces. Trialing different formats has contributed to test methodologies and strategies and has effectively advanced global citizen deliberation.

Designing for impact Global deliberation should be designed with clear impact goals from the start. What those goals look like will depend on the governance area where the policy issue at hand is negotiated.

Docking Global Citizens' Assemblies

The urgency of bringing citizen voices directly to the global governance stage has been widely acknowledged. Scholars argue that everyday citizens 'bring reflective judgment to bear in a way that stakeholders, activists, and politicians may not'[1]. Advocates of citizens' assemblies emphasise that citizen participation is crucial to 'accelerate action on the biggest challenges of our age and generate solidarity'[2]. Civil society and philanthropic actors further claim that a global citizens' assembly that exerts influence at the multilateral level 'will take the world into a new governance regime'[3]. But how can these aspirations be realised? This was the departure question.

But first: what exactly does 'docking' mean? In social movements literature, 'docking' or 'docking points' refer to entry points where activists and civil society organisations claim space or assert public demands into established policy- or decision-making processes[4]. Docking entails recognising and leveraging opportunities to engage with influential or elite bodies, such as political parties, government agencies, regulatory institutions, and local administrations[5].

For global citizens' assemblies, docking entails identifying power structures—broadly defined—that are open to engaging with and considering the

[1] Dryzek, J. S., Bächtiger, A., Chambers, S., Cohen, J., Druckman, J. N., Felicetti, A., Fishkin, J. S., Farrell, D. M., Fung, A., Gutmann, A., Landemore, H., Mansbridge, J., Marien, S., Neblo, M. A., Niemeyer, S., Setälä, M., Slothuus, R., Suiter, J., Thompson, D., Warren, M. E., & Weber, E. (2020). Global citizen deliberation on genome editing. Science, 369(6510), 1435–1437, p. 1435.

[2] Coalition for a Global Citizens' Assembly (n.d.). Homepage. Retrieved March 7, 2025, from https://www.gcacoalition.org/

[3] Stormonth-Darling, J., Malkin, C., & Parsons, A. (2024). Integrating health into a global citizens' assembly: Design considerations and infrastructure options. Iswe Foundation and Wellcome, p. 1.

[4] Haslam, P. A., & Godfrid, J. (2020). Activists and regulatory politics: Institutional opportunities, information, and the activation of environmental regulation. The Extractive Industries and Society, 7(3), 1077–1085. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.exis.2020.06.019

[5] Spalding, R. J. (2023). Breaking ground: From extraction booms to mining bans in Latin America. Oxford University Press.

recommendations of these assemblies. Multilateral institutions, for example, can serve as key docking points. For instance, Dryzek and colleagues argue that a global citizens' assembly on genome editing could prompt a more effective response from institutions such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and the World Health Organisation (WHO), as well as national governments. Similarly, in artificial intelligence, docking points may include technology companies that acknowledge their 'democracy problem' and recognise the value of public input in AI design.[6] Civil society also functions as a docking point. The first-ever Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis, for example, presented its recommendations in the blue and green zones of COP to shape global public discourse and foster alliances that amplify the impact of global public deliberation.[7] A networked approach to docking is also viable. A global citizens' assembly on health-related topics, for example, could collaborate with an alliance of global health actors—including foundations, philanthropies, NGOs, academia, health ministries, transnational health networks, private-sector stakeholders, and activists—that could 'coordinate and collectively deliver on health-related GCA recommendations.'[8]

While there is no single way to dock global citizens' assemblies, one can argue that their success lies in their ability to establish legitimacy, foster institutional buy-in, and create sustained channels for influence within these diverse structures of global governance.

For docking to be effective, several critical questions remain: What makes a GCA appealing to institutions within which it seeks to dock? To what extent are these institutions willing to share discursive and decision-making power with an assembly composed of everyday citizens? What legal frameworks or mechanisms enable successful docking? What kinds of impact do different docking mechanisms produce? These questions, among others, will be central to ongoing discussions as GCAs continue to establish their place in global governance.

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[6] Stilgoe, J. (2024). AI has a democracy problem. Citizens' assemblies can help. Science, 385(6711), eadr6713. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adr6713

[7] Global Assembly Team. (2022). Report of the 2021 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis. Global Assembly.

[8] Stormonth-Darling et al 2024, p. 20.

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Docking and Power
A broader understanding towards impact

We need a broader understanding of 'docking' than connecting to institutions. At the global level, there isn't a central source of power 'dock' into. Yes, there is the United Nations (UN), but it comprises many elements. Should one 'dock' into the General Assembly, the Secretary-General or some Member States? In research that informed a GloCAN Technical Paper,[9] I found that, despite efforts in previous decades to open up its doors to non-state actors, the ultimate power at the UN still lies with its 193 Member States, each of which has its own agenda. Because there are multiple actors in global governance, docking with one institution doesn't automatically lead to impact. This also means that docking in global governance demands careful consideration of where power lies and what channels for connection are available.

Moreover, docking should not be conflated with commissioning. Indeed, the absence of a single executive power in global governance means that commissioning can be top-down (e.g. by a multilateral institution) or bottom-up (e.g. initiated by civil society). Docking can, therefore, take many forms. One form could be for a global citizens' assembly to produce recommendations that are sent 'up' for consideration at, say, the UN General Assembly. But another form could be for communities to mobilise at the local level and for a transnational movement to emerge around the assembly that organically, albeit indirectly, connects the assembly to power holders.

We don't have a huge number of examples where citizen deliberation has been docked into and had an impact on global governance. However, we do have examples of public participation initiatives that have successfully docked not necessarily into institutions but into key moments in the international calendar.

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[9] Aishwarya Machani (2024) Designing Global Citizens' Assemblies for Impact: Power Mapping of the United Nations System. Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN) Technical Paper No. 3/2024. Available at: http://glocan.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Technical-Paper-3-2024-Machani.pdf

In 2020, for example, on the occasion of the 75th anniversary of the UN, a group of civil society organizations in partnership with several UN agencies ran a 'global conversation.'[10] The goal was to understand people's views on the UN after 75 years and to identify people's demands for the next 75 years. The outcomes of this initiative were incorporated into a Member State Declaration[11] that (mostly) reflected these demands.

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Another, perhaps more top-down public participation initiative, was the Secretary-General's initiative 'Our Common Agenda.'[12] The UN Foundation Next Generation Fellows[13] were asked to gather inputs from young people worldwide. We carried out consultations, and what's interesting is that many of the ideas put forward had been around for over a decade, e.g. the idea for a UN Youth Office. So, we were largely amalgamating existing ideas and feeding them into 'Our Common Agenda.' In a way, it was a window of opportunity, or 'invitation to dock' that we Fellows took advantage of.

By contrast, the work that we did at Iswe Foundation[14] to advocate for a permanent global citizens' assembly does feel more bottom-up. Although there is more awareness of global citizen deliberation than there was a few years ago, the idea of a permanent global citizens' assembly is still novel. The UN is an organisation built on representation. Member States represent their constituents, whilst civil society organizations act as representatives of particular stakeholder groups. There is little offer for direct citizen engagement at the UN. In consequence, we made thought leadership a key component of our

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[10] See: https://un75.online/our-community/
[11] Available at: https://www.un.org/pga/74/wp-content/uploads/sites/99/2020/07/UN75-FINAL-DRAFT-DECLARATION.pdf
[12] See: https://www.un.org/en/common-agenda
[13] See: https://ourfutureagenda.org/nextgenerationfellows/
[14] https://iswe.org/

advocacy strategy. For example, we published a paper[15] with the UN Foundation[16], Plataforma CIPÓ[17], Blue Smoke[18], and Southern Voice[19], which analyses the history of citizen participation at the UN and makes a case for strengthening it.

> " Because actors in the UN system are sceptical about global citizen deliberation, we have to make sure that any deliberations we organise aren't performative.

Another insight from my research has been the need to design for impact from the very beginning. Because actors in the UN system are sceptical about global citizen deliberation, we have to make sure that any deliberations we organise aren't performative. They need to have a high impact. For example, Iswe is organising a Global Citizens' Assembly for COP30 and Beyond,[20] thinking carefully about what the framing question should be. For the outcomes of the assembly to have impact, they need to be relevant to the discussions around COP30. We also know that we won't get a mandate from 193 Member States for this Assembly, but we are building a multi-stakeholder Coalition for a Global Citizens' Assembly[21] that consists of Member States and other power holders. We see this as essential for impact, but as you'll notice, we're not trying to 'dock' into an existing institution. Instead, we're building long-term 'docking' infrastructure that allows us to 'dock' into key moments, such as COP30.

We are learning important lessons from this coalition-building work. For example, normative arguments about global citizen deliberation tend to resonate well with grassroots civil society organizations. More 'institutionalised' civil society organisations, and—perhaps surprisingly—public participation academics and practitioners tend to be more sceptical. The former tend to be concerned that global citizen deliberation initiatives could

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[15] Available at: https://unfoundation.org/our-common-agenda/strengthening-citizen-participation-in-global-governance/

[16] See: https://unfoundation.org/

[17] https://plataformacipo.org/en/

[18] https://bluesmoke.blog/about-us/

[19] https://southernvoice.org/

[20] See: https://www.gcacoalition.org/the-global-citizens-assembly-for-people-and-planet

[21] https://www.gcacoalition.org/

tread on the toes of representatives or threaten existing channels of representation, including electoral democracy. The latter are concerned that citizen deliberation can be tokenistic and produce 'consultation fatigue'. For such actors, as well as UN organizations and Member States, instrumental arguments about global citizen deliberation tend to work better. It is also vital to clearly communicate one's 'Theory of Change.' This helps address scepticism and can also equip delivery partners and participants to hold organisers of global citizen deliberation accountable.

Finally, it is worth noting that whilst advocacy coalition-building can be slow, thanks to the work of many other organisations, we are not at ground zero. Also, campaigns tend to hit a tipping point after which change can happen very, very quickly. Windows of opportunity often precipitate these tipping points. For example, the campaign for a UN Youth Office had been building momentum for many years, and when a window of opportunity opened with the 'Our Common Agenda' initiative, it was seized, and the UN Youth Office was established within a year. The 'campaign' for global citizen deliberation has been building, making its way into the mainstream quickly over the last few years, so who knows? The tipping point may be closer than we think.

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Looking Back

Twelve Years experimenting with Docking

Docking can be understood as a key dimension of impact, positioned somewhere between influence and institutionalisation. Using an iceberg analogy, docking represents the visible tip—formally integrating a deliberative process into existing institutions. Beneath the surface, however, lie deeper layers of impact. This includes the transformative experiences of participants and decision-makers, capacity building for practitioners, and the broader diffusion of a deliberative culture. These less visible but equally important outcomes are not captured by docking alone. Docking is a long and continuous process. With each new project and iteration, we improve the docking to a given governance ecosystem.

Looking back, a lot has changed around docking and impact of global deliberation. The first global process of deliberation Missions Publiques took part in was the World Wide Views on Biodiversity, led by the Danish Board of Technology Foundation.[22] That process gathered 3,000 people in 25 countries in preparation of COP11 in Hyderabad. The deliberative process was a success, building on an already large experience of such formats. The docking process, however, was a new adventure. We managed to send a delegation of participants to COP11 to present their results. We proposed language for the final text of the declaration, mentioning the need for citizens' participation in global governance. At the end of the process, we managed to get a mention of the World Wide Views methodology in COP11's final declaration.[23] It represented 1 line of a 288-page-long report. This can be evaluated as poor impact, but it was the first proof that there is a place for global deliberation in global governance. Looking at the larger effect, this process motivated many partners to go on with efforts to bring World Wide Views to the next level. It set a first track record.

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[22] See: https://participedia.net/case/world-wide-views-global-consultation-on-biodiversity
[23] Available at: https://www.cbd.int/doc/meetings/cop/cop-11/official/cop-11-35-en.pdf

So, as we learned that France would host Climate COP21, we decided to launch a new round of World Wide Views on Climate[24], together with the Danish Board of Technology Foundation and many other partners from the previous 2012 edition. This allowed us to scale the process to 78 countries in 2015, in the frame of an official cooperation with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCC) and the French Government. The process involved over 10,000 citizens worldwide and over 80 partners in the participating countries, many of whom were gathering their first experience with deliberative democracy.

As part of the impact activities of the project, we were invited to follow and participate in the negotiation events before and during COP21 in Paris. We organised joint events with UNFCC's Secretariat and the French Government, met with many delegations and stakeholders. The report was delivered to all delegations, 196 countries, during one intersession. We advocated to include a statement in the Paris Agreement directly mentioning the value of citizen participation in fighting climate change. Yet the Paris Agreement doesn't include such language, so that particular action did not succeed. If we look at docking as the only part of impact, we could have concluded that this process had no real impact. But again, through the work within the World Wide Views Alliance, we achieved many other forms of impact. We trained 50+ new partners across the world, provided proof that large-scale deliberation is achievable and can be done in cooperation with the UN system, and involved 10,000 citizens in all continents.

> " To improve docking, we may want to turn to a different governance framework, one that may already be more open to the direct input of citizens

One key learning of that project was that in order to improve docking, we may want to turn to a different governance framework, one that may already be more open to the direct input of citizens. This is why we focused our next global deliberation on Internet Governance. The topic was placed high on the

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[24] See: https://participedia.net/case/the-world-wide-views-on-climate-and-energy

international agenda, and its governance architecture was already based on a multistakeholder approach—so the docking should have been easier. We began attending events on internet governance. We reversed the logic of the project: instead of proposing a global deliberation, we proposed launching a multistakeholder coalition whose goal would be to prepare and implement a global deliberation. This, in theory, would allow for stronger docking from the outset, as stakeholders would be responsible for identifying the key questions to be addressed. The coalition mobilised governments (Germany, Swiss), International Organizations (UN Secretariat, UNESCO, Council of Europe, European Commission), the private sector (Facebook, Google, Mozilla), and Civil Society (Web Foundation, Wikimedia Foundation, World Economic Forum, the Internet Society) The year was 2017, the coalition was named 'We, the Internet,'[25] and off we went. The broad idea was to run a first Global Citizens' Dialogue by 2018, bring the results into the Internet Governance process, and iterate for the year 2020 to improve the process.

But we had to learn patience. It took three years to secure enough funding and momentum to be ready to start in February 2020. This is when the COVID-19 pandemic suddenly took us all by surprise.

Even under those conditions, we managed to hold the global dialogue in 76 countries with over 6,500 participants in October 2020. We had to make significant shifts, which became strong learning processes, and actually improved docking and impact. About half of the dialogues went online. We had to learn how to deploy a high-quality online or hybrid process. Partners around the world innovated to make it possible for citizens to participate. The coalition of actors worked very closely to address relevant questions that arose with the pandemic, such as those around disinformation. Another change was the decision to hold a stakeholder dialogue in June 2020, entirely online. Initially, we had planned to invite 20 to 40 stakeholders per participating country and let them work on a specific question of Internet Governance, which was discussed as part of the UN75 year. We had to move that process online: it gathered around 400 participants from 80 countries of the world, and the result of this dialogues directly impacted the options paper produced by Germany and the United Arab Emirates submitted to the UN Secretariat. In this case, we could say there was a

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[25] See: www.wetheinternet.org

strong docking, but we did not 'dock' where we first thought. Regarding broader impact, We the Internet allowed us to train key partners in deliberation which later became reference players in their region (for example in Brazil, Rwanda, Latvia, Romania, etc). The project also showcased the feasibility of the approach based on a coalition to launch, fund, design, and deploy a global deliberative process. In some countries, the partners managed to find docking and impact with their respective governments, like in Rwanda, or the Maldives.

> " Docking is one part of impact, but sometimes, other dimensions are more important

The previous international and global deliberations were key to our role in the Conference on the Future of Europe, helping us build the experience and track record of what it means to deploy such a complex transnational endeavour. We made five key learnings:

First, docking is an incremental process. Each experience helps advocate for expanding the global deliberation infrastructure and its docking. Building a track record is key to extending the scope of docking and the legitimacy of the approach.

Second, the coalition-based approach seems relevant and effective in building the ground for docking. Each participating organisation in a coalition experiences the advantages of a deliberative process, and actors of change can leverage this experience for internal or domestic advocacy at a later stage. Such an approach also flips the coin in terms of impact dynamic: the process has an impact because stakeholders have worked themselves on the questions they want to ask and not because they are put in the situation of receiving results they never asked for.

Third, docking is one part of impact, but sometimes, other dimensions are more important. This is particularly true at the beginning of experimentation and iteration with global and transnational deliberations.

Fourth, docking may be there without us seeing it. A key discussion when looking at impact is about the metrics and indicators to measure it. But

sometimes there is no way to find out. Here's an anecdote. Three years after World Wide Views on Climate, I met a potential partner for a collaboration on We the Internet. After a while, this person told me that, of course, they knew what we were doing, because back in 2015, they used the Final Report of World Wide Views during all his meetings with other governments while being the head of the delegation of their country at COP21 in Paris. This anecdote opens a door. Each and every person coming into contact with a deliberative process may be its next commissioner.

Fifth, docking is accelerating alongside the growing spread of deliberative governance. Back in 2012, explaining the approach often required a full hour. Today, the phrase 'citizens' assembly' is usually enough to convey the idea. There's reason to believe we're entering a new cycle where the popularity of these instruments will reach a tipping point at several different levels.

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Co-Director of Missions Publiques. He has contributed to implement participatory and deliberative processes at all levels of policymaking, from neighborhood to global negotiations on topics like Internet Governance, Space and space governance, Bioethics, Global Governance itself.

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