GloCAN
GLOBAL CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY NETWORK

# Global Citizen Deliberation for and with Stateless People

Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN)
Essay No. 1/2025

Hong Do
Central European University (Austria)

# Introduction

In current political debate, migration and citizenship are often framed as sources of division in polarized societies. Yet many societies have long been pluralistic in terms of migration histories and citizenships, with many people across the world spending much of their lives in countries where they do not hold citizenship. Discrimination and disenfranchisement pose a theoretical and political problem to democracy's promise of sovereignty and equal participation. The problem is made all the more severe because non-citizenship often overlaps with other forms of disadvantage.

These challenges should receive particular attention within deliberative democracy as it entails the promise of increasing inclusion and citizen empowerment. Deliberative forums, such as citizens' assemblies, are often presented as a way to make voices heard that are otherwise overlooked in 'usual' political processes like voting. Indeed, citizens' assemblies bear the unique advantage of being democratic innovations that can be flexibly set up to reach different populations. Global and transnational citizen assemblies (GTCAs) may be particularly suitable for seizing this opportunity, as they are already established in contexts of linguistic and cultural diversity, and encompass political issues and spaces beyond the nation state. However, it is important to critically examine where and how GTCAs are implemented to use such opportunity and, by extension, actually contribute to greater political equality.

In this essay, Hong Do advances such critical examination in the context of the most severe situations of non-citizenship, namely statelessness. In so doing, she also underlines the all-encompassing relevance of citizenship for political participation at all levels of governance in a global system where nation states gatekeep access to political and civic rights. Her theoretical reflection outlines three normative reasons to demand the inclusion of those most affected by political exclusion, while drawing a hopeful picture of the practical implementation of those demands.

Franziska Maier
Co-Lead
Global Citizens' Assembly Network

# No Status, No Voice

## Why we need a Global Citizens' Assembly for Stateless and Unrecognized Individuals

by Hong Do

### Introduction

Millions of people worldwide live in a legal and political limbo, denied basic recognition and protections. Statelessness and political invisibility affect those living in unrecognized territories, the displaced, refugees, and other marginalized communities. Existing international governance systems rely on nation-states as intermediaries, leaving stateless individuals and unrecognized groups without any formal channel to influence decisions that profoundly shape their lives. Their precarious political situation extends beyond humanitarian suffering and raises urgent questions about political voice and representation, both within states and on the global stage.

This essay reflects on the potential of international political participation that can effectively include everyone affected by the crisis of voice and recognition. One promising solution is a Global Citizens' Assembly (GCA): a deliberative forum composed of randomly selected 'ordinary' individuals from all backgrounds and places across the world, including refugees, stateless persons, and those living in unrecognized territories, brought together to collectively deliberate on global challenges.

### The Crisis of Statelessness

Statelessness arises when individuals lack legal recognition by any state, often as a result of conflict, discriminatory laws, or state collapse. Some reside in unrecognized or occupied territories such as Palestine, Western Sahara, or Northern Cyprus, where the absence of an internationally acknowledged government means their identity documents are often rejected by other states, effectively rendering them stateless (Tu 2022).

Others are entirely without documents, unacknowledged by any existing government and denied even the most basic recognition of belonging to a nation. A person might be born in exile to refugee parents and never acquire legal nationality (EUAA 2023). A displaced family may flee conflict without documents and later find their country of origin unwilling to recognize them. Children in remote or marginalized communities may grow up without birth certificates, especially where registration is costly, bureaucratically complex, or mistrusted due to discrimination (UNHCR 2015). In some cases, people assume they are citizens until they attempt to enroll in school, access healthcare, or travel, only to then discover they are seen as a 'legal ghost' (UNHCR 2011).

Statelessness is not accidental. It is a human-made problem, rooted in deliberate political exclusion and discriminatory laws. In the Dominican Republic, a 2013 ruling retroactively revoked citizenship from families of Haitian descent, creating intergenerational statelessness almost overnight (Santos 2025). Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Act stripped the Rohingya of legal recognition, rendering them stateless in their own homeland (Kyaw 2017, Parashar and Alam 2019). This legal erasure has enabled decades of persecution, culminating in mass killings and the forced displacement of nearly one million Rohingya to Bangladesh since 2017 (UNGA 2018). There, in the world's most overcrowded refugee camps in Cox's Bazar, they live in fragile "bamboo frame shelters, digging bore wells and constructing walkways and embankment supports across the hilly terrain" (Gorlick 2019, p. 8) – trying to build a home on land that constantly feels unstable and temporary.

Contested territories also exacerbate statelessness: Turkish Cypriots and Taiwanese hold passports issued by unrecognized states, often treated as invalid at borders (Achiri and Klem 2024). Meanwhile, Palestinians are not only forced to navigate shifting documentation regimes under occupation (Shiblak 2006) but also live under siege, enduring systematic dispossession, bombardment, and famine (OCHA 2025). Their unrecognized status is accompanied by perpetuated global hesitation to resolve the conflict, allowing the humanitarian crisis to prolong (Kyris 2024).

Whatever the cause, the consequences are devastating. Stateless people are often excluded from cradle to grave. In death, they can be buried without identity, without documentation, and without dignity (UNHCR 2015). Those affected describe themselves as "invisible," "alien," "living in a shadow," "like a street dog," and "worthless" (UNHCR 2015, p. 15). This legal and political invisibility leaves millions without basic rights and protections. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights affirms that "everyone has the right to a nationality" (UNGA, 1948: Article 15), over ten million people worldwide remain stateless, denied citizenship and the rights that come with it. In reality, the number is likely much higher, as statelessness also encompasses social exclusion from meaningful access to public goods such as education, healthcare, employment, and political participation (UNHCR 2023).

## Political Exclusion: Domestic and Global Dimensions

The political implications of statelessness are profound. Stateless individuals have no meaningful voice in the laws or policies governing their lives. They are excluded from democratic processes, unrepresented in national institutions, and systematically silenced.

This exclusion extends beyond national borders into global governance. International institutions such as the United Nations, the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization wield immense influence over global issues such as war, trade, migration, climate, and development (Alter 2014). While these institutions rarely acknowledge stateless people as political subjects in their own right, they nonetheless shape the conditions under which such individuals live, move, survive, and are governed. Through funding structures, norm-setting, legal frameworks, and diplomatic pressure, international institutions influence how states recognize or deny recognition to individuals. For example, Sustainable Development Goal 16.9 encourages "legal identity for all, including birth registration" to eliminate statelessness (United Nations, n.d.; see also Manby 2020). Moreover, international institutions shape how states manage borders, deportations, and refugee flows (Betts 2015).

Yet global governance operates through the consent of states, with national governments acting as intermediaries between citizens and international institutions (Zürn 2004). This system breaks down for the stateless. Without a

government to represent them, they have no access to the channels through which global policies are debated, decided, or challenged. This absence of representation is more than a bureaucratic oversight. It exposes a structural flaw in the global order. Most people are governed by international institutions without voice, without consent, and without any means to contest the decisions that shape their lives (Do 2025). For the stateless, this is not only a humanitarian emergency. It is a political condition of systemic exclusion. They are denied not just rights, but the political agency to claim them, both within their countries of residence and in the global arena.

The solution to statelessness is not only legal but political. It can begin with a simple yet radical proposition: listen to those who have been excluded. Not through intermediaries. Not through humanitarian agencies or NGOs speaking on their behalf. But through direct political participation. Stateless individuals, like all people, are governed by rules, policies, and global frameworks. Yet they are denied any say in shaping them. If those "invisible" individuals are expected to comply with international norms like refugee protocols or climate adaptation policies, they must also have a voice in their creation. Political participation cannot remain a privilege granted only to those with valid documents dependent on state recognition. It is a fundamental human right – one that must be realized even when states fail or refuse to grant citizenship to stateless people.

## Three Normative Reasons for the Inclusion of Stateless People in Global Citizen Deliberation

A Global Citizens' Assembly (GCA) offers a practical and democratic response to the inability of stateless and unrecognized people to participate in the global governance frameworks that dictate their living conditions. Being designed as a randomly selected, diverse, and inclusive body of people from around the world, a GCA enables direct, deliberative participation, beyond the boundaries of national sovereignty. This is not a utopian dream. In 2021, the world's first prototype of a global citizen forum, the Global Assembly, successfully brought together 100 individuals from different countries, using principles of random and stratified sampling. Participants deliberated, learned, and co-created the People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth (Global Assembly 2021).

While this pilot was a groundbreaking proof of concept, it still largely prioritized individuals with recognized citizenship. Only one participant was stateless, originally from Palestine (Curato et al., 2023, p. 49). The next step must be bolder and more inclusive, explicitly reaching those who are stateless, displaced, or living in unrecognized territories, whose voices are systemically excluded from every other political forum.

By doing so, the GCA would serve not just as a space for dialogue, but as *a powerful act of recognition and reparation*. It would grant stateless people what has always been denied to them: political visibility. And it would signal a broader shift in global governance, from systems built on the exclusion of the undocumented, toward institutions that recognize every person's equal right to help shape the future we all share.

A GCA that includes stateless and unrecognized individuals would achieve three normatively desirable goals:

## *Affirm Equal Moral Worth*

The inclusion of stateless individuals in global deliberation affirms the foundational principle that all persons have an *equal basic moral status*. As Arneson (1999, p.103) argues, "individuals possess the same fundamental rights, and the comparable interests of each person should count the same in calculations that determine social policy. Neither supposed racial differences, nor skin color, sex, sexual orientation, ethnicity, intelligence, nor any other differences among humans negate their fundamental equal worth and dignity."

Such moral mandate is universally affirmed, yet in practice it is routinely violated. Stateless individuals are denied political voice and legal recognition on the basis of arbitrary criteria, such as birthplace, ethnicity, or the collapse of a state. As a result, their interests are systematically excluded from decisions that shape their lives. Thus, for stateless and unrecognized people, political exclusion often translates into social invisibility and systemic dehumanization.

By providing a seat at the deliberative table, a GCA delivers a powerful message: these individuals are not "invisible," "alien," "living in a shadow," "like a street

dog," or "worthless," as they have described themselves. Their participation recognizes their dignity and affirms that their voices matter. To join a deliberative forum such as a Global Citizens' Assembly is to be made visible, to have one's existence and standpoint acknowledged as part of the collective, global, human agenda. While representation alone cannot guarantee specific policy outcomes, it creates the conditions under which claims can be heard and justified. It makes possible the articulation of priorities from below, especially on matters where international institutions play decisive roles in shaping the lives of stateless people, from refugee protection and climate displacement to public health access and identity documentation. Representation in these deliberative spaces enables not only recognition but also potential influence over policy frames that are otherwise uninformed by the experience of the stateless and that remain inaccessible to them.

### *Create a Path to Direct Self-Representation*

Most global governance institutions operate through state-based channels, excluding those who are not citizens or residents of recognized states. Stateless individuals, whether Rohingya, Palestinians without passports, Bidoon in the Gulf, or denationalized Dominicans of Haitian descent, are systematically denied the means to represent themselves.

A GCA breaks with this paradigm by providing *direct political agency* to individuals who would otherwise have no way to influence decisions that profoundly shape their lives. Importantly, this form of participation is not a symbolic consultation. It is a procedure that can allow stateless people to co-develop global norms and policies.

This form of representation also addresses a critical epistemic deficit. Stateless individuals possess situated knowledge drawn from firsthand experience of exclusion, displacement, bureaucratic erasure, and legal invisibility. Including their voices in deliberation enriches the quality of democratic reasoning and enhances the legitimacy of outcomes. Their insights are particularly vital in areas where their needs are often misrepresented or ignored, such as migration governance, refugee protection, climate-induced displacement, digital identity systems, and equitable access to global public goods like healthcare. Without

their participation, global policy risks reproducing the very injustices it seeks to solve.

### *Offer Peaceful Avenues for Political Expression*

When individuals and communities are systematically denied a voice in shaping the decisions that govern their lives, the result is often frustration, alienation, and, in some cases, radicalization. This is particularly true for stateless and unrecognized peoples, who must endure a profound sense of invisibility and powerlessness.

A Global Citizens' Assembly (GCA) offers a constructive response to this challenge. It provides a respectful, structured, and globally visible platform through which stateless and politically excluded individuals can express grievances, articulate needs, and engage in the co-creation of solutions to global challenges. By facilitating constructive dialogue and meaningful participation, the GCA can serve as an early intervention mechanism that enables generative forms of non-violent conflict resolution and fosters trust across divided communities (Global Assembly Team 2022, p. 33-34, see also Conway-Lamb et al. 2025). This participatory space channels political energy away from despair or violent extremism and towards hopeful, constructive, and globally connected forms of civic engagement. In doing so, it contributes not only to the empowerment of marginalized peoples but also to the stability and peace of the broader international system.

A common concern, however, is that the Global Citizens' Assembly (GCA), by necessity and by design, can include only a limited number of randomly selected participants. If only a small fraction of stateless and unrecognized individuals is directly involved, how can such a mechanism meaningfully benefit the broader population? This is a valid and important challenge. Yet the transformative potential of a GCA should be understood not solely in terms of individual participation but also through its broader structural, symbolic, and discursive effects.

A Global Citizens' Assembly, however, does not have to be reduced to a single global forum. In its design, it can also consist of numerous localized assemblies, enabling a much wider range of individuals to participate meaningfully over

time. The rotation of participants would further reinforce the idea that anyone can be called upon to contribute, creating a more inclusive and anticipatory democratic ethos.

For those not directly participating, the very existence of such forums can generate a powerful sense of political recognition and possibility. Seeing others like themselves engaged in public debate and contributing to global deliberation opens a space for empowerment (Do 2025, p.17). For example, refugees living in camps who see representatives from their own communities actively participating in the GCA may feel encouraged and hopeful that their voices can shape policies affecting their lives and potentially contribute to improve their own conditions. This visibility strengthens the belief that they, too, have the power to influence collective decisions and determine their own futures.

## Conclusion

From Gaza to the Rakhine State, from refugee camps in Bangladesh to the makeshift homes of stateless Roma families in Europe, the number of people governed without representation is rising. Climate change, increasing militarization, and prolonged displacement are deepening the crisis of statelessness, further isolating millions who live without recognized nationality or legal protection.

Millions of stateless individuals remain invisible in the eyes of the world. Without passports or citizenship, they lack access to legal identity, social services, and political representation. Their exclusion is not an unfortunate accident but a political choice that denies them recognition, rights, and a voice. This exclusion can and must be challenged through deliberate and inclusive political action.

A Global Citizens' Assembly is not a silver bullet, but it is a concrete step toward inclusion. By bringing together stateless, displaced, and unrecognized individuals alongside citizens of recognized states, the GCA affirms the equal moral worth of all people and provides a direct, deliberative forum for those systematically denied political agency. It creates pathways for self-representation, incorporating vital firsthand knowledge into global decision-

making. Furthermore, the GCA offers peaceful and constructive avenues for political expression, reducing alienation while fostering spaces for inclusion, dialogue, and trust-building. Above all, it sends a powerful message: no one is too marginal, invisible, or 'hard to reach' to participate in shaping the shared future of humanity.

# Outlook

Statelessness is a political problem that requires political solutions. It is a symptom of flawed governance at both national and global levels, necessitating a remedy from within and beyond conventional governance structures. Given the inflexibility of governance mechanisms to provide stateless, unrecognized, and undocumented individuals with the basic social services and fundamental freedoms, Hong Do presents a Global Citizens' Assembly as a powerful forum not just for dialogue, but more importantly for recognition and reparation. This essay reflects on how global citizen deliberations would affirm these groups' moral worth, enable direct self-representation, and offer peaceful avenues for political expression. It is not the solution for all the problems faced by stateless people, such as access to public services, participating in national elections, and freedom of movement, among other restrictions they face daily. However, having their voices inform global conversations and policies is a creative and democratic way of shaping governance structures that work for all.

The normative reasons outlined in this essay also beget practical considerations. What topics for deliberation should be identified as critically and immediately important for stateless people, and how? What measures must be taken to ensure not just inclusive but also safe participation, given that statelessness is often accompanied by various forms of insecurity? How can global citizen deliberation prompt change for domestic policies to legally, politically, and socially protect the rights of stateless people? Answers to these questions must also consider and connect to the collective and sustained efforts of activists, practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and global citizens. The precarious situations in which most stateless people find themselves demand swift and collective response. A Global Citizens' Assembly may be a first step, but additional reflection is required on what actions would (and should) follow from such a global forum.

Dahlia Simangan
Hiroshima University
Global Citizens' Assembly Network

# Acknowledgments

The author is thankful to friends and colleagues who have helped develop these ideas. Earlier drafts of this essay benefited from the suggestions of Dan Wessner, Cristina Astier, and Antoinette Scherz. These reflections have evolved as part of a doctoral research project. The author is grateful to Kun-Feng Tu for hosting fieldwork in Taiwan, and to the Open Society University Network (now the Global Higher Education Alliance for the 21st Century) for financial support.

The author also thanks the Global Citizens' Assembly Network's Melisa Ross, Franziska Meier, Nicole Curato, and Dahlia Simangan for their editorial support.

Finally, the author acknowledges students at Parami University, who, despite being displaced due to the conflict in Myanmar, have shown remarkable strength and resilience. This essay is dedicated to them.

# References


Achiri, E., & Klem, B. (2024). Navigating the legal liminalities of a de facto state: Migrant precarity and placeholder identity papers in Northern Cyprus. *Migration Studies, 12*(2), mnae015. https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnae015

Alter, K. J. (2014). *The new terrain of international law: Courts, politics, rights*. Princeton University Press.

Arneson, R. (1999). What, if anything, renders all humans morally equal? In D. Jamieson (Ed.), *Singer and His Critics* (pp. 103–129). Oxford: Blackwell.

Betts, A. (2015). The normative terrain of the global refugee regime. *Ethics & International Affairs, 29*(4), 363–375. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679415000350

Conway-Lamb, W., Chalaye, P., De Pryck, K., Elstub, S., Sanchez, E. M., & Sari, N. H. (2025). Analysing the Global Assembly's influence: The challenges of linking to the deliberative system of global climate governance. *Environmental Science & Policy, 171,* 104124. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2025.104124

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.

Do, H. (2025). What makes international institutions legitimate to citizens of non-democratic states? *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy.* https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2025.2499361

EUAA. (2023). 4.13.1.2. Stateless children of asylum seekers and refugee parents. In *Asylum Report 2023*.

Global Assembly Team. (2022). *Report of the 2021 Global Assembly on the climate and ecological crisis.* http://globalassembly.org

Global Assembly. (2021). *People's declaration for the sustainable future of planet Earth (Version 2.0).* https://globalassembly.org/resources/downloads/Peoples-Declaration-for-the-Sustainable-Future-of-Planet-Earth-v2.0_18.12.21.pdf

Gorlick, B. (2019). *The Rohingya refugee crisis: Rethinking solutions and accountability* (Refugee Studies Centre Working Paper Series No. 131). http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3506638

Kyaw, N. N. (2017). Unpacking the presumed statelessness of Rohingyas. *Journal of Immigrant & Refugee Studies, 15*(3), 269–286. https://doi.org/10.1080/15562948.2017.1330981

Kyris, G. (2024). The recognition of a right to statehood and Palestine. *Ethnopolitics,* 1–11. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2024.2362510

Manby, B. (2020). 'Legal identity for all' and statelessness. *The Statelessness & Citizenship Review, 2*(2), 248–271. https://doi.org/10.35715/SCR2002.113

OCHA. (2025). *Humanitarian situation update #235 | Gaza Strip.* https://www.ochaopt.org/content/humanitarian-situation-update-235-gaza-strip

Parashar, A., & Alam, J. (2019). The national laws of Myanmar: Making of statelessness for the Rohingya. *International Migration, 57,* 94–108. https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12532

Santos, F. (2025). The necropolitics of statelessness: Coloniality, citizenship, and disposable lives. *Citizenship Studies, 29*(1–2), 17–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2025.2467270

Shiblak, A. (2006). Stateless Palestinians. *Forced Migration Review.* https://www.fmreview.org/palestine/shiblak

Tu, K.-F. (2022). *The right of stateless peoples: Reconsidering statelessness, rightlessness, and the right to have rights* (PhD thesis, University of Warwick).

UNHCR. (2011). *Helping the world's stateless people.* https://www.refworld.org/docid/4e55e7dd2.html

UNHCR. (2015). *I am here, I belong: The urgent need to end childhood statelessness.* https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/2015-10-StatelessReport_ENG16.pdf

UNHCR. (2023). *UNHCR reports progress on tackling statelessness.* https://www.unhcr.org/news/press-releases/unhcr-reports-progress-tackling-statelessness

United Nations General Assembly. (1948). *Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights

United Nations General Assembly. (2018). *Situation of human rights in Myanmar* (Resolution A/RES/73/264). United Nations Digital Library. https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/73/264

United Nations. (n.d.). Goal 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies. *Sustainable Development Goals.* Retrieved July 10, 2025, from https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16#targets_and_indicators

Zürn, M. (2004). Global governance and legitimacy problems. *Government and Opposition, 39*(2), 260–287. http://www.jstor.org/stable/44483070

**Cite text as**

Hong Do (2025) Global Citizen Deliberation for and with Stateless People. Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN) Essay No. 1/2025. Available at: https://glocan.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Essay-1-2025-Do.pdf

**Funding declaration**

The research supporting this essay was fully sponsored by Central European University Foundation of Budapest (CEUBPF). The theses explained herein represent the ideas of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the views of CEUBPF.