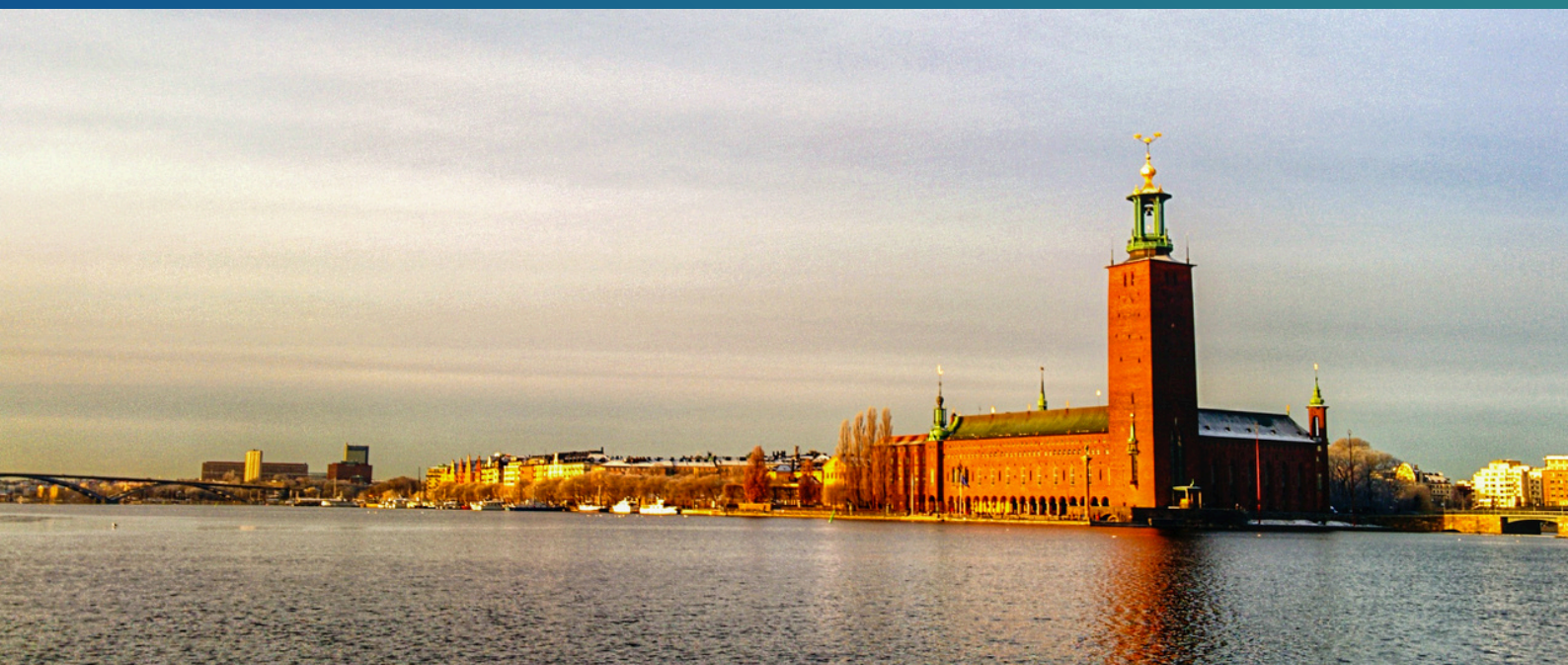


The Stockholm Series of Public Lectures on Climate Change and Democracy



Is public deliberation the key? How citizen assemblies can accelerate climate action

Nicole Curato

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The Stockholm Series of Public Lectures on Climate Change and Democracy (“Stockholm Series”) is a cooperation between renowned Stockholm-based institutions with a particular focus on climate change and democracy from different perspectives, including the Stockholm Environment Institute; the Stockholm Resilience Centre; Future Earth; the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung’s Nordics Office; LSU – The National Council of Swedish Children and Youth Organisations; and We Don’t Have Time. It aims to inform, inspire, and engage experts and the general public alike by providing high-profile public lectures on the interlinkages between climate change and democracy, followed by debate.

Nicole Curato’s lecture **“Is public deliberation the key? How citizen assemblies can accelerate climate action”** took place on Tuesday, 11 June 2024, at International IDEA’s Headquarters at Strömsborg in Stockholm, Sweden.

The climate crisis demands democracy reform. Climate assemblies—and similar deliberative mechanisms—can be innovative and important parts in the democratic toolbox. But what works and what doesn’t? What can we learn from existing experiences, both in the Global North and the Global South? How can we best engage citizens to meaningfully participate in climate decision-making? This lecture makes the case for more inclusive and effective climate action through citizen deliberation—at the local, national and global level.

The lecture was opened by **Dr Kevin Casas-Zamora**, Secretary-General, International IDEA, and followed by a conversation with **Dr Tim Daw**, Project Leader, Swedish Climate Assembly, as well as by questions and comments from the audience, and a reception.

Stockholm,
11 June 2024

Thank you, everyone, for joining us this afternoon at the Stockholm Series of Public Lectures on Climate Change and Democracy. I am grateful to International IDEA for inviting me, as well as to the Konrad Adenauer Foundation and the network of organisations that made this lecture series possible.

I also want to ground this presentation in the land where I work and live. I am a diasporic settler in Canberra, the land of the Ngunnawal people. The work that we do at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra benefits from over 65,000 years of Indigenous systems of knowledge. We are deeply honoured to have the opportunity to learn from the traditional custodians of the land, especially as we ground our work on deliberation and the environment.

I'd like to begin my talk by reflecting back on how Jennie King concluded her talk in the first lecture of the Stockholm Series. She ended her lecture with a plea. She asked the audience '[not just to defend liberal norms, but to re-make them for genuine inclusion, participation, and empowerment](#).' She added, 'We want to build a liveable future, and we believe democracy is the best vehicle to achieve that.' I couldn't agree more.

I have been working in deliberative democracy for the past fifteen years. [My research](#) focuses on the transformative power of public deliberation in disaster- and conflict-affected settings. But what is deliberative democracy? In my work, I consider deliberative democracy as a political aspiration and a political project.

As a political aspiration, deliberative democracy envisions a society where collective decisions are based on an inclusive, informed, and reflective exchange of reasons. Of course, our societies right now are far from this ideal. Politics has deteriorated into a shouting match among political elites. Hyper-partisan rhetoric rather than reasonable discussion has become the basis for many political decisions. Our media environment is not conducive to reflection. Our attention is constantly hacked by clickbait headlines and doom scrolling on social media. Misogyny and racism have become normalised. How can we have meaningful conversations in a privatised public sphere owned by big tech companies? These problems in our communicative environment make deliberative democracy a suitable aspiration for the 21st century.

This is not a naïve aspiration. Deliberative democracy is not a pipe dream but a real-world political project. Deliberation, after all, is a common practice in democracies. Ministers, judges, experts, and regulators all deliberate before making decisions. Deliberations in these institutions are part of a constellation of institutions that make up institutions of representative democracy.

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But deliberative democracy needs more than these institutions of representative democracy doing their jobs well. Deliberative democracy advances a different approach to collective decision-making in that it places importance on the contribution of everyday citizens in deliberation. Deliberative democracy is based on the premise that citizens should be the authors of laws that govern their lives. How exactly does this work?

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Section 1: The transformative power of deliberative democracy in disaster- and conflict-affected settings

As a political project, witnessing the transformative power of deliberative democracy in climate and conflict-affected settings is deeply personal to me. I was born and raised in the Philippines—a country located in the Pacific Ring of Fire and the typhoon belt. This makes the Philippines one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world. Disasters in the Philippines are a frequent life experience. We have [what historian Greg Bankoff calls a 'culture of disaster,'](#) where threats of natural hazards have led people to develop habits of cooperation and mutual aid.

The year 2013, however, was a game-changer. On November 8th, tropical cyclone Haiyan laid waste to a cluster of islands in some of the Philippines' poorest regions. Described as the world's strongest storm recorded in almost a century, the death toll was pegged at 6,000 at a time when the government could not accurately count the dead. A twenty-three-foot storm surge reduced villages along the coastline to a scatter of tin roofs. 'It's absolute bedlam' was how the head of the Red Cross described the scenes, as scores of corpses lay sprawled over debris.

Typhoon Haiyan was a game-changer as it transformed our thinking about disasters and climate change. Many have grown tired of being romanticised as resilient people. ['Happy-washing' was how Yvonne Su, Ladylyn Mangada, and Jessa Turalba](#) described the



After typhoon Haiyan, the Philippines. Photo by Nicole Curato.

imagery of people in high spirits after a tragic storm published on broadsheets, brochures of humanitarian organisations, and widely shared on social media. These images are a cover-up. We need more than mutual aid to survive our climate-challenged world.

Motivated by frustration, I put together a research project and conducted twelve ethnographic field visits over three years in a coastal community that survived the typhoon.

I understood that Haiyan was a watershed moment—that the governance arrangements emerging from this crisis will have a lasting impact. And for the most part, it did. The disaster became a watershed moment for the Philippines, giving rise to a populist strongman winning a landslide victory in the Presidential election after the typhoon. This was a man who showed compassion and strength to disaster-affected communities, as he promised decisive action in disaster and conflict situations. This was also the same man who promised to kill all drug addicts and a man who delivered on such a promise. Today, the International Criminal Court is conducting a probe into possible crimes against humanity.

But this is not the full story. Moments of democracy under duress are also moments for everyday people to innovate, to claim space, to assert their voice and visibility, and to take charge of their own political destiny. This is why deliberative democracy is a political project.

In my fieldwork, I have witnessed a community that crafted a mechanism for deliberative self-governance to catalyse post-disaster recovery. I witnessed everyday people—fishermen, market vendors, housewives, and shopkeepers—work with community organisers to brainstorm, collect evidence, and reach a consensus on how they can build climate-resilient homes. With philanthropic funding, they were able to [raise 1.1 million Euros to secure a 12-hectares of land that is now the site of over 500 housing units.](#)

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I had the honour of observing them deliberate on various facets of the housing project—from choosing the materials to build their homes to their options for installing renewable energy sources. They discussed the paint colour for the house's exterior, street names, and criteria for the selection of beneficiaries or people who will receive homes. I listened to community members reflect on their arguments, why one thought only people who participated in deliberations should be the ones qualified to receive homes, and why the other thought everyone from their community should get a home, regardless of participation, especially the elderly who find it difficult to attend meetings or mothers who need to look after their children.



Citizen deliberations after typhoon Haiyan, the Philippines. Photos by Nicole Curato

In their deliberations, they arrived at the conclusion that they are not just building climate-resilient homes that are safe from tsunamis. They realized that they were building self-governing communities to survive in a climate-challenged world.

This initiative took place outside the state's official agenda of relocating coastal communities from the city to the foot of the mountains. They asserted their Right to the City by refusing to live in so-called 'residential ghettos' that the government constructed at the edges of the city.

Just last week, one of my key informants texted me. She lived in a different coastal community, one that the government forced to live in one the 'residential ghettos.' In her text, she told me that she had moved to her mother's home just now. She said her family may have been safe from tsunamis by living at the foot of the mountain at the margins of the city, but they are now at risk of extreme heat. Staying in the city, close to the bay, was far preferable, for they at least have a respite from 40-degree temperatures with the afternoon breeze. I asked her if she regretted moving to the housing project the government offered to her. She said she did not have much of a choice. The options were either being evicted and end up being homeless or doing what the government told her to do.

Public deliberation empowers citizens to take charge of their destiny by carefully weighing options and intentional action.

This contrast highlights the transformative power of public deliberation. Public deliberation empowers citizens to take charge of their destiny by carefully weighing options and intentional action.

The story of the Philippines reminds us that public deliberation is powerful when it is connected with existing networks of resistance and civil society action—in this case, with experienced community organisers and philanthropic funders.

Public deliberation is also effective when the norms of inclusive deliberation are built in the process of self-governance, from problem identification to action. Public deliberation is viable despite the constraints of the wider political context defined by patronage and strongman politics. Public deliberation works when the approach is systemic. When it has clear pathways for action.

Of course, the Philippines' story is not unique. Realising the political aspiration of deliberative democracy is a global political project.

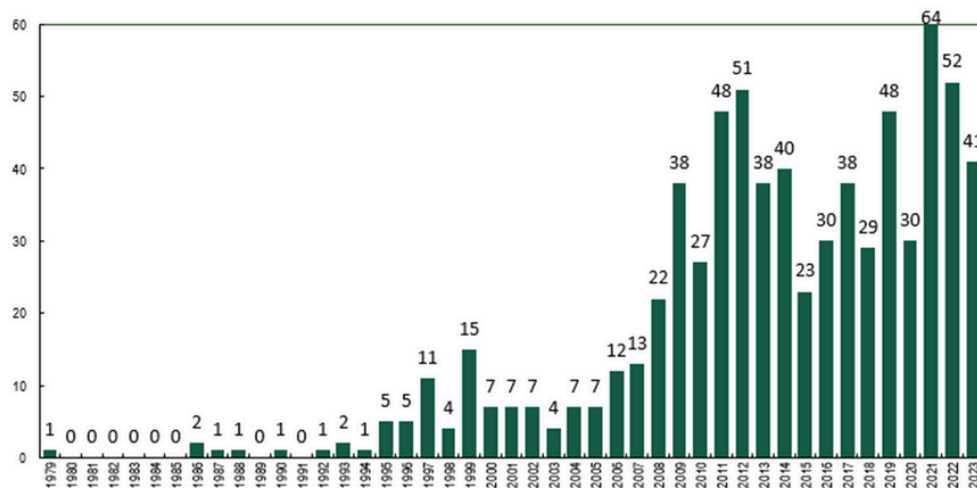
In the second half of my presentation, I will shift gears and focus the discussion from a particular example of public deliberation in the aftermath of a disaster to a form of citizen deliberation applied in many parts of the world.

Section 2: The deliberative wave continues to grow

All over the world, we are witnessing [what the OECD calls a 'deliberative wave'](#) or the [increasing use of sortition-based deliberative assemblies like citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies](#). This approach to putting deliberative aspirations into action is quite distinct from the story we heard in the Philippines, though these approaches can learn from each other.

Figure: The deliberative wave continues to grow

Number of representative deliberative processes over time (total per year), 1979-2023



Note: n=733; Processes that spanned over multiple years noted by the year of their completion (except for permanent ongoing processes). For 2023, additional 16 cases were submitted but were not included as were still in progress during the data validation stage.

Source: OECD Deliberative Democracy Database (2023).

What sets citizens' assemblies apart from other forms of public deliberation? Let me identify two design features of these assemblies. Using [philosopher Cristina Lafont's language](#), the aim of citizens' assemblies is to serve the role of a mirror and a filter.

All over the world, we are witnessing what the OECD calls a 'deliberative wave'.

As a mirror, the composition of citizens' assemblies seeks to reflect the 'microcosm' of society. Participants are selected using sortition or random selection, which can be compared to how respondents are recruited via stratified random sampling in surveys to represent the wider population.

Designers of citizens' assemblies typically seek to recruit an equal number of men and women from different age groups, regions, languages, and years of education. Depending on the topic of deliberation, other relevant social categories may also be considered in sampling, such as attitudes towards climate change, as in the case of climate assemblies. At the heart of the process of random selection is the principle of equality and inclusion. In electoral democracy, the principle is one person, one vote. In a citizens' assembly, the principle is one person, one lottery ticket.

Meanwhile, as a filter, citizens' assemblies aim to distil a range of views and synthesise complex evidence before arriving at points of consensus and identifying points of disagreement. Some scholars argue that what sets these assemblies apart from other forms of democratic innovations is the emergence of 'considered judgment'.

Citizens' assemblies do not only ask citizens what their preferred policies are, as in the case of a poll, focus group discussion, or public consultations. Citizens' assemblies ask citizens to go through informed and reflective deliberations before putting forward policy recommendations. The outcome of these deliberations is a collective statement, or policy recommendations turned over to the body or authorities that commissioned the process. What the commissioning body will do to the recommendations varies depending on the context.

What is the theory of change behind citizens' assemblies? Well, it depends on who you ask. From my understanding of the literature, one popular view is that citizens' assemblies catalyse climate action in this manner. By bringing together a diverse group of everyday people, we hear the judgment of citizens not captured by dark money or politicians whose decisions are constrained by short-term electoral cycles. Empirical data shows that not only are everyday citizens competent deliberators, the judgment of everyday citizens about what to do with the climate crisis is usually ahead of politicians. I'll give you examples later.

By bringing together a diverse group of everyday people, we hear the judgment of citizens not captured by dark money or politicians whose decisions are constrained by short-term electoral cycles.

What this means is citizens' assemblies give a boost to politicians or policymakers who want to take more decisive steps to address the climate crisis. They can cite the climate assembly as an impartial body of everyday people who want to take far more ambitious measures than what is currently on the table.

What this also means is that citizens' assemblies provide an alternative political approach to addressing climate change. Borrowing the language of Erik Olin Wright, climate assemblies are a 'real utopia' or a political institution that brings to life our most ambitious democratic aspirations. It provides an alternative to the shouting matches, the political deadlocks, the disinformation, the hyper-partisanship, and the profit-driven algorithms. It demonstrates how climate politics can and should be—informed, respectful, reflective, decisive. This is why a lot of attention is devoted these days to thinking of ways to institutionalise these assemblies or make them a permanent feature of climate governance. I'll come back to this later.

One paradigmatic example of a citizens' assembly is the French Citizens' Convention on the Climate, which President Macron convened in response to the Yellow Vest Protest in 2019. Over six months, 150 randomly selected citizens listened to scientists and economists, and deliberated in smaller groups. At the end of the convention, participants proposed a range of recommendations, responding to the question of how to cut the country's carbon emissions by 40 per cent by 2030.



Australian Citizens' Jury on Genome Editing. Photos by David Beach.

This is one of the most high-profile examples of citizens' assemblies because the recommendations influenced France's climate policy. For example, the Assembly Members' recommendation to ban short-haul flights was implemented.

But this is also one of the most controversial examples of citizens' assemblies. President Macron promised to submit the recommendations to the parliament without filter, but he backtracked on this promise and vetoed some of the more radical recommendations, such as making the intentional destruction of ecosystems or ecocide a crime. He said what 150 citizens have written is not the Bible.

What President Macron said may seem flippant, but it lays bare some of the discomforts that critics have against citizens' assemblies. Should the Bible—in this case, the climate action Bible—be written by 150 unelected, randomly selected citizens? Where does their legitimacy come from? What role should they play in policymaking? Should they be only advisory, or should they be empowered to make binding decisions? Or is it enough that policymakers take their recommendations seriously? More specifically, can these assemblies, in fact, accelerate climate action?

[The Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies just published a report](#) finding that most climate assemblies, at least in Europe, have been 'commissioned by governments, often at the behest of parliaments'. Marit Hammond, a sustainability transformation scholar, argues that these policy-oriented practices of deliberation [have become 'overly accommodationist.'](#) Climate assemblies have served as a 'system-reinforcing tool,' a form of citizen engagement that has become 'at the disposal of authorities' and assimilated into the same political system that deliberative democrats seeks to transform.

Indeed, [in my research on the threats to the integrity of citizens' assemblies](#), my collaborator Lucy Parry and I found that our colleagues who design and implement citizens' assemblies find the parameters set for deliberation by commissioning authorities to be constraining. Governments still have the power to set the parameters of what can and cannot be discussed by framing the question that Assembly Members are tasked to answer, approving experts that can give testimonies, and cherry-picking recommendations that fit their political agenda.

Of course, this is not the fully story. For example, the Danish Climate Assembly, commissioned by the Ministry of Climate, Energy, and Utilities, established a board that determined the Assembly's remit, but it was the Assembly Members who decided which themes to prioritise. Other assemblies have started integrating systems-thinking in their design by analysing how the climate assembly's recommendations can interact with other policy domains and broadening the deliberations to consider the structural causes of the climate and ecological crisis.

For Marit Hammond, however, we should be taking a closer look not only at the system-supporting qualities of climate assemblies but also at their system-disrupting potential. Instead of only focusing on how climate assemblies can be linked with the policy process, we could think about how climate assemblies can be linked with disruptive protest movements or other forms of transformative action.

We should be taking a closer look not only at the system-supporting qualities of climate assemblies but also at their system-disrupting potential.

I can think of two examples here. The first example goes back to the case of the Philippines that we talked about a while ago —where everyday citizens, in collaboration with community organisers, created deliberative self-governance mechanisms that create sustainable material and political infrastructures that provide an alternative to a patronage- and strongman-driven democratic regime.

The second possibility takes a global dimension. Here, I am thinking about the radical potential of a Global Citizens' Assembly. I want to spend the final part of my presentation laying out this possibility.

Section 3: The radical potential of a Global Citizens' Assembly

For the past three years, my research collaborators and I have been conducting research on [the Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis](#). The Global Assembly took place in 2021. It came at a time when global climate cooperation was experiencing deadlocks and suffering from a legitimacy deficit. It is the world's first global forum of citizen deliberation using the format of a citizen's assembly.

This means Assembly Members were recruited using a multi-stage civic lottery. Algorithmic sortition identified 100 points in the world map from which Assembly Members would be selected, followed by local organisers' improvisations to recruit Assembly Members in those points using principles of random selection. For 68 hours over 11 weeks, Assembly Members listened to expert evidence and exchanged views online. The main output was the People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth, which was first disseminated at the 2021 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP26) in Glasgow.

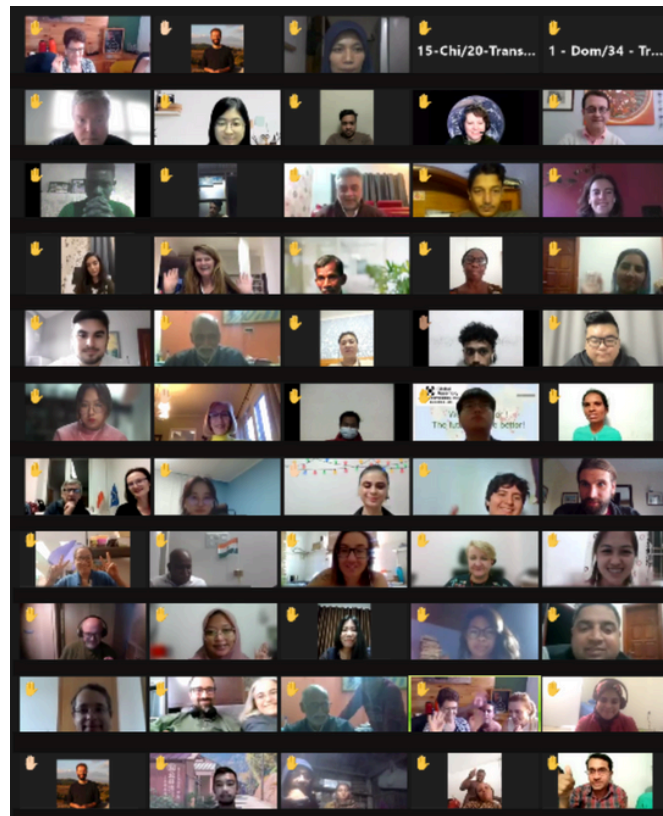
This was a civil society-led initiative. [In-depth reports about the Global Assembly are available online](#), and I will not repeat the insights from these reports today. Instead, what I want to do is to focus on one question that I believe is also shared by many people in the room, and that is: What is the added value of a Global Assembly in sparking global action on the climate and ecological crisis?

We know there are already spaces for citizens' voices to be heard in global climate governance. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), activists, and civil society groups advance various agendas that represent the voices of various communities. One can argue that a Global Assembly is different because it directly connects the voices of everyday citizens to global governance without the mediation of civil society actors, celebrities, or states.

But why does that matter? Why do recommendations or declarations that emerge from deliberations of everyday citizens matter on the global level?

When I talked to my colleagues specialising in global climate governance, they found the People's Declaration from the Global Assembly not entirely groundbreaking. Calling to protect Nature from Ecocide is an agenda that has long been carried by global movements and networks like Stop Ecocide International.

Another recommendation by Assembly Members is to formally integrate education on climate change in school syllabi and government communication, but sceptics of climate assemblies would say, yes, that's blindingly obvious. We don't need to spend long hours and millions of dollars to generate obvious recommendations. It's become a cliché for climate assemblies, or any citizens' assembly, to call for more education.



Global Assembly session. Photo by the Global Assembly.

Are citizens' assemblies just there to amplify existing calls for climate action? Is that the added value? I think the added value of a global climate assembly is grounding and connecting deliberations of everyday citizens from around the world on climate action. What do I mean by this?

One can argue that part of global institutions' legitimacy deficit is their distance from everyday people's lives. I was listening to breakout sessions of the Global Assembly after COP26. For context, the Global Assembly took place leading up to the COP, and deliberations continued after the COP. One task given to Assembly Members was to reflect on and share their thoughts about the recently concluded COP in Glasgow. In one breakout group, several Assembly Members shared that they could not follow COP. It was not covered in their national media, and even if they had access to international coverage, the content was not localised to their own contexts. COP, in that sense, was detached from the lives of everyday people. We can learn something from this.

A particular function that the Global Assembly can serve is to connect the deliberations taking place in formal institutions of global governance, the deliberations taking place in the Global Climate Assembly, and the deliberations taking place within local communities.

For this to happen, we—and by we, I mean academics, process designers, implementers, funders, and Assembly Members themselves—need to invest our time and resources in creating mechanisms to ground the global to the hyper-local and connect the hyper-local to the global. [Organisers of the Global Assembly](#) call this 'the cultural wave.'

In our research at [Global Citizens' Assembly Network](#)—or GloCAN—we have conducted an inventory and in-depth case studies of creative ways in which local organisers grounded

the process and outcomes of the Global Assembly to their communities. We documented stories of local organisers who sought the endorsement of village leaders. Others wanted to collaborate with social media influencers to amplify the Global Assembly. Others realised the importance of securing the support of the imam or a parish priest to discuss climate change and what the IPCC report means to their communities.

This is a critical step for a Global Climate Assembly to matter. While it's important to think about ways to connect the Global Assembly to formal institutions of global governance (i.e. will it make a difference in COP?), equally, if not more important is connecting the Global Citizens' Assembly to everyday spaces where deliberations about the climate and ecological crisis are already happening.

But that's not enough. Global citizens' assemblies don't only need to be grounded. They also need to be connected. The Global Assembly's added value lies in its function of connecting deliberations among everyday citizens taking place in local communities to deliberations among everyday citizens on the global level.

I could envision the Global Assembly serving as a space where an Assembly Member from, for example, the Niger Delta, can share their lived experience of how their community suffered from contaminated farmland and drinking water because of an oil spill caused by a multinational oil company headquartered in Europe.

I imagine the Global Assembly to be a space where we realise that communities from the Niger Delta are not deficient citizens who need more training and capacity building in deliberation so they can uplift their lives and influence their governments to do better.

The Global Assembly can make us realise that communities in the Niger Delta have long pushed back against the abuses of Europe-based oil companies who left families ['eating, drinking, breathing the oil.'](#)

I imagine the Global Assembly to be an opportunity where Assembly Members from Europe realise that the failure of deliberation did not happen in the Niger Delta, and instead, realise that the failure of deliberation happened in Europe—that what is needed is to build European citizens' capacity to instigate or sustain public deliberations in their own countries about the regulatory environment that emboldens Europe-based oil companies to be reckless in their operations in the Global South.

In other words, a connective Global Assembly can spark the realisation that the quality of public deliberation in Europe on climate action determines whether people and the environment in the Niger Delta live or die.

This, I think, is what a global citizens' assembly can do in relation to climate action. A global assembly grounded on hyper-local deliberations and cognisant of the connectedness of deliberations unfolding in places like the Niger Delta and Europe

The Global Assembly's added value lies in its function of connecting deliberations among everyday citizens taking place in local communities to deliberations among everyday citizens on the global level.

A global assembly is not a global group hug. It is a space to have difficult conversations and, in so doing, reimagine how we can and should relate to each other in our climate-challenged world.

empowers everyday citizens to appreciate their distinctive responsibilities in acting on climate change. In other words, a global citizens' assembly creates a mechanism for everyday people around the world to establish relationships of accountability with each other.

A global assembly is not a global group hug. It is a space to have difficult conversations and, in so doing, reimagine how we can and should relate to each

other in our climate-challenged world. It allows everyday citizens to ask: What are our responsibilities to each other? How can public deliberations in my community uplift your community? How can climate assemblies in my country better connect with the climate-related issues you face in your country?

I'd like to conclude my presentation by answering the question posed in its title: Is public deliberation the key to accelerating climate action? The answer is yes but with caveats. What is the purpose of deliberation? Is it to support the political system or trying to change or disrupt it? Who sets the terms of deliberation? How radical are the possibilities we are allowed to consider and put into action?

I'm a big fan of open questions, so I will leave it there.

Thank you for your attention.



Nicole Curato is Professor of Political Sociology at the Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance at the University of Canberra. Her research focuses on the transformative power of deliberative governance in fragile and conflict-affected settings. She has advocated for and contributed to building a 'global deliberative democracy' model inspired by decolonial theory and practice, critical historiography, and ambitious democratic experiments, such as the Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis.

Nicole is the founder of the Global Citizens' Assembly Network (GloCAN), former editor of the *Journal of Deliberative Democracy*, founding editor of the *Deliberative Democracy Digest*, and founder of the Deliberative Democracy Summer School. She has published three books on deliberative democracy, numerous journal articles, public reports, and op-eds for outlets like *The New York Times*, *The Guardian*, and *Australian Foreign Affairs*.

Most recently, Nicole contributed two key chapters on climate assemblies and other deliberative practices to International IDEA's newest publication [*Deliberative Democracy and Climate Change: Exploring the Potential of Climate Assemblies in the Global South*](#).



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The Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance (CDDGG) at the University of Canberra is a world-leading centre for scholarly and applied research in deliberative governance. Researchers at the Centre offer diverse fields of expertise, which advance a common research agenda that examines how deliberation –inclusive, reasonable, and reflective communication– can empower people to shape political decisions that affect their lives.

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