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# Analysing the Global Assembly's influence: The challenges of linking to the deliberative system of global climate governance☆

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ABSTRACT

While there has been a proliferation of climate assemblies in recent years at national and sub-national levels, 2021 saw the world's first global-scale citizens' assembly bringing together 100 citizens from across the globe to deliberate about the climate and ecological crisis and present their conclusions at COP26 in Glasgow. The Global Assembly (GA) thus offers a unique chance to examine the opportunities and challenges for a global mini-public seeking to achieve influence in global climate governance. While the GA's internal qualities have been analysed elsewhere, this paper evaluates the extent to which it achieved its 'external' goal of giving ordinary people a voice in global climate governance. Initial verdicts were that it had limited impact, partly due to the logistics of operationalising such an ambitious event and the complexities of global climate governance. Yet these challenges remain, and we argue that any future GA would benefit from a clearer sense of what 'influence' means in this global context and the nature of institutional links it requires. This paper compares the organizers' and assembly members' perceptions of influence with analysis of the GA's actual influence, by examining the GA's efforts to 'couple' with institutions of global climate governance, and its contribution to deliberation-making, legitimacy-seeking, and deliberative capacity-building. We conclude that any future global climate assembly needs to recognise global climate governance as a deliberative system, conceptualise dynamics of influence in systemic terms, and seek to build multi-directional links across this system.

## 1. Introduction

Citizens' assemblies are increasingly being used to enable informed public opinion, based on democratic deliberation, to feed into climate decision-making at local, regional, and national levels (Smith, 2023).[7] Advocates of citizens' assemblies argue that they can mitigate some of

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[7] A mini-public brings together quasi-randomly selected citizens to deliberate and produce recommendations. A citizens' assembly is a type of mini-public with enough participants (typically 100–150 at national level) and a long enough duration for them to submit policy proposals to public authorities (Boswell et al., 2023, p184; Giraudet et al. 2022, p2).

the structural deficiencies that limit representative governments' abilities to address long-term issues like climate change (Smith, 2021; Willis et al., 2022). Climate change is a challenge that transcends national borders though, and thus requires globally coordinated action. The socio-economic power imbalances and geographical and temporal distances between those most responsible for greenhouse gas emissions, and those who are most adversely affected by the consequences, mean climate change is particularly in need of a democratic global response.

Given deliberative democracy's advantages over vote-centric approaches to complex, value-laden decision-making, and the significant practical barriers to electorally representative governance at the global level (Dryzek, 2006; Bohman, 2007), it has been argued that deliberative forms of governance have an important role to play in the democratisation of global governance.

The ideal of a *global-scale* citizens' assembly has been discussed as a way to help resolve the democratic deficit in global governance, with climate change identified as a global challenge whose governance could benefit from such a deliberative forum (Dryzek et al., 2011; Vlerick, 2020). This aspiration was realized in 2021 when the world's first global-scale citizens' assembly took place. Called the Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis (henceforth GA), it brought together 100 citizens from across the globe to deliberate and present their conclusions in the form of a People's Declaration (Global Assembly, 2021) at the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). This article examines how much influence the GA had on global climate governance, and what can be learned from this empirical case to inform future global-scale citizens' assemblies, especially those focused on climate change.

Analysis of the GA to date has largely focused on its internal characteristics and processes, such as its inclusiveness, remit, and internal governance (Curato et al., 2023; Malkin et al., 2023; Ross et al., 2023). There has been comparatively less research on its intended or actual influence on international climate negotiations and global climate governance, and those works generally concluded that the GA had 'limited' impact (e.g. Mellier and Wilson, 2023; Curato et al., 2023). It can be challenging for a citizens' assembly to have meaningful influence on policy, but designing for influence is as important as designing and facilitating an inclusive process (De Pryck et al., 2025).

Analysis is emerging on how national-level climate assemblies have sought influence, and the extent to which they have achieved it (see e.g. Boswell et al., 2023). Hendriks (2016) finds that the potential of mini-publics to influence policy depends significantly on their links with decision-making authorities. Yet, there has been an absence of research on the potential for, and nature of, institutional links between citizens' assemblies and the wider global governance system that could allow citizens to play a more influential role in international decision-making processes. The GA offers a unique opportunity for researchers and practitioners to analyse the opportunities and potential pitfalls for any future global-scale mini-public seeking to achieve relevance, legitimacy and influence. It was not only the first citizens' assembly on *climate change* to be conducted at a global scale; it was the world's first global citizens' assembly on *any* topic.[8]

Verdicts on the level of influence that the first GA achieved will inevitably have a bearing on theoretical enthusiasm for democratic innovation at the global scale, practical support for future efforts to organize or fund another global assembly, and the confidence and ambition of participants in any future global assembly. We argue

therefore that it is critical to have a clearer way of conceptualising and evaluating the GA's influence, not only within UNFCCC negotiations, but on the broader *deliberative system* of global climate governance. In this article, to advance understanding of how global climate assemblies can contribute to more democratic global decision-making processes, we apply a deliberative systems lens to advance understanding of the potential linkages between mini-publics and wider political systems through the concepts of institutional coupling, deliberation-making, legitimacy-seeking, and deliberative capacity-building.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we explain the rationale for seeking a deliberative approach to global climate governance, and outline the importance of being able to evaluate the influence of a global climate assembly (2). Next, we explore how other scholars have conceptualised the ways mini-publics can be linked, influentially, to a deliberative system (3). We then introduce the case study and our analytical approach and methods (4). The subsequent sections respond to the paper's three research questions:

1. How did the GA organizers and assembly members define and perceive the GA's influence? (5)
2. To what extent did the GA have influence within the deliberative system of global climate governance? (6)
3. What would be the challenges and opportunities for a future GA seeking to achieve influence within global climate governance? (7)

We conclude, in 7, that the design of any future global-scale climate assembly would need to be founded on three key observations: global climate governance is a complex deliberative system; linking a mini-public with influence to this system requires multi-directional coupling; and designing for influence means generating not just 'policy impact' but system-wide deliberative influence.

## 2. Importance of evaluating the Global Assembly's influence on global climate governance

In this section, we first outline the rationale for taking a deliberative democratic approach to global climate governance, and then make the case that assessing the influence of the world's first global citizens' assembly on climate change is critical, both to determine what benefits citizens' assemblies can contribute to global climate governance, and to learn lessons that can inform the design and evaluation of any future global-scale citizens' assembly with a particular focus on the effect of its institutional linkages.

Some argue that building global democratic structures is the only way to orchestrate the kind of global cooperation needed to tackle climate change and the global challenges it exacerbates, such as poverty, mass migration, and conflict (Vlerick, 2020). A key obstacle to this democratic aspiration is that electoral arrangements implemented in local and national governments are less suited to the global level, where the lack of available sanction mechanisms makes it difficult to prevent the risk of non-compliance and free riders (Dryzek et al., 2011). However, electoral democracy is not the only form of democracy.

Deliberative forms of democracy have been deemed particularly appropriate for tackling climate change, given they tend to promote consideration of marginalised interests and future generations, and can challenge dominant assumptions, allowing alternative perspectives and discourses to emerge (Stevenson and Dryzek, 2014; Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2019). Deliberative democracy is 'grounded in an ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives' (Bächtiger et al., 2018, 2). Deliberation can introduce critical or disruptive discourses that challenge the status quo (Hammond, 2020) such as discourses outside dominant economic and political paradigms.

To enact the norms of deliberative democracy across political systems, a variety of interconnected institutions, spaces, and agents are

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[8] The most comparable precedent was arguably the World Wide Views (WWViews), a series of mini-publics held, most recently, ahead of the 2015 UN climate summit in Paris (Rask et al., 2019). That event involved 10,000 people from 76 countries, but it lasted only one day and consisted of multiple national debates rather than deliberation across national borders, so it did not classify as a global citizens' assembly.

required (Mansbridge et al., 2012). Citizens' assemblies have been proposed as one such space that could play a critical role in injecting deliberative democracy into global climate governance (Dryzek et al., 2011; Vlerick, 2020). There is evidence that citizens' assemblies may be more likely than electoral democratic processes to prioritize public goods and future generations, and to promote the kind of longer-term thinking needed for issues like climate change (Willis et al., 2022).

Even at national and sub-national levels, the challenges involved in designing a citizens' assembly that can achieve genuine influence in climate governance are substantial. The national-level climate assemblies held in Europe have each adopted quite different types of connection with government authorities, allowing different claims to independence and legitimacy, and different approaches to policy influence (Boswell et al., 2023). Given the logistical issues of scaling-up a citizens' assembly from national to global level, the transboundary and unpredictable nature of climate change, the complexity of global climate governance including the plurality of actors and the absence of a centralised authority to pass legislation and implement policy, it appears even more challenging to envisage what appropriate coupling arrangements would look like for a global citizens' assembly to enable it to avoid co-option and challenge the climate governance orthodoxy.

Various policy- and practitioner-oriented guidance has been published on how to design for, and evaluate, influence or impact in mini-publics (see e.g. OECD, 2021; Thorman and Capstick, 2022) and an emerging body of academic work explores how mini-publics seek to link influentially to the wider political system (Curato and Böker, 2016; Hendriks, 2016; Boswell et al., 2023). However, none of this literature explicitly considers global-scale mini-publics, or the distinct challenges for seeking influence within global climate governance to help address the climate emergency.

## 3. Linking mini-publics in the deliberative system: challenges of influence and co-option

In trying to ensure that a citizens' assembly has the opportunity to authentically influence global climate governance, a key challenge is to link it with other established global stakeholders in a manner that avoids the assembly being co-opted by those actors or overly accommodating of dominant discourses (Hammond, 2020). Böker and Elstub (2015) suggest that a deliberative systems approach, where mini-publics are linked to other parts of the system, can enhance their potential for the critical deliberation that is required to democratize global climate governance. The success of such an approach depends on the nature of those linkages, and in this section we review how some scholars have conceptualized the different ways mini-publics may connect to the wider deliberative system.

The premise behind the deliberative systems approach is that it is impossible to enact all the norms of deliberative democracy in a single institution, process, or forum, or for every implicated person (or their representative) to deliberate and reason together face-to-face. We may think instead of deliberation as a distributed feature of a governance system, and conceptualise a division of labour between different parts of the system. Even though some parts will be more deliberative than others, or may run counter to deliberative norms, we are interested in 'deliberativeness' as an emergent quality of the system as a whole (Parkinson, 2018). The different parts of the deliberative system need to be meaningfully connected to ensure that opinions, reasons or discourses generated in one site can be communicated, authentically reflected on, and have influence, elsewhere in the system (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Elstub et al., 2016, Neblo and White, 2018). Research to date has focused on the strength of these connections, and their consequences for mini-public influence, through the 'coupling' metaphor (Hendriks, 2016), and on the type of influence mini-publics can achieve in deliberative systems (Curato and Böker, 2016).

### 3.1. Coupling mini-publics with deliberative systems

Previous research has indicated that the nature of the relationships, or 'coupling', between a mini-public and the wider polity, including public authorities and citizens, is crucial in determining how much influence it can achieve (Hendriks, 2016). In the context of deliberative systems, coupling has been defined as 'processes of convergence, mutual influence and mutual adjustment' so that 'each part would consider reasons and proposals generated in other parts' (Mansbridge et al., 2012, p23). Mansbridge et al. (2012) associate different types of coupling with different systemic 'pathologies' that undermine deliberation and transmission of influence within the system, including *decoupling*, where reasons or discourses emanating from one part can go ignored by other system elements; and *tight coupling*, where one element in the system is so closely caught up with, or co-opted by, another part that it cannot consider alternative perspectives and the system cannot self-correct. Mansbridge et al. (2012) assert that '*loose coupling*', between institutions and parts of the system, is normatively superior to those system dynamics, because it avoids both the co-option that can occur when system parts are too tightly coupled and the absence of influence when they are decoupled.

Importantly for our analysis, Hendriks (2016, p57) proposes conceptualizing coupling 'in more active terms', developing the notion of 'designed coupling'. Through her study of a mini-public on energy that was formally integrated into a legislative committee in Australia, Hendriks observes that relationships between parts of a deliberative system are not inevitable or predetermined but can be actively 'designed', potentially strengthening deliberative capacity in both institutions. Specifically, Hendriks observes that institutional coupling can be designed to vary not only in terms of *strength* (looser or tighter coupling), but also to enable movement of reasons in different *directions* between parts of the system (unidirectional, two-directional and multi-directional coupling). Hendriks (2016, p50) concludes that the relationship between the energy mini-public and the legislative committee was *unidirectional* because the committee members 'were able to mutually adjust their preferences in light of the citizens' recommendations but the reverse was not possible'. Hendriks argues that a mini-public should aim for *multi-directional* coupling, for example through two-directional coupling with multiple other parts of the system.

### 3.2. Enhancing deliberation in deliberative systems

Also taking a deliberative systems perspective, Curato and Böker (2016) argue that a mini-public's value is dependent upon how it is embedded within a deliberative system, to enable enhanced deliberation in the system overall. However, even with designed institutional links in place these relationships cannot be fully controlled; consequently, the full systemic effects of a mini-public are unforeseeable. Curato and Böker (2016, p176) assert that 'for mini-publics to claim relevance and legitimacy in the deliberative system, they must be consequential in a deliberation-enhancing sense'. In other words, rather than simply bringing about a particular outcome such as policy change, they must have a positive effect on the deliberative quality of the system as a whole. They refer to this as 'external quality', which they break down into three component parts: *deliberation-making*, a term first used by Niemeyer (2014, p179) to refer to a mini-public's role in enhancing public deliberation by, for example, synthesising various positions on an otherwise polarized or complex debate; *legitimacy-seeking*, reflecting a mini-public's imperative to gain broad acceptance by the wider citizenry, noting that legitimacy cannot be achieved solely through internal design or formal links with authoritative bodies; and *deliberative capacity-building*, the extent to which a mini-public builds the capacity of a polity (not just the mini-public participants but also the non-participating public and political institutions) to host inclusive and authentic deliberation (Curato and Böker, 2016, p178).

Hammond (2020) distinguishes between 'system supporting' and 'system disruptive' deliberation; mini-publics are usually one or the other. The former tend to be top-down, commissioned by a public authority, and policy-oriented. The latter are bottom-up, organised by civil society, and generally better placed to target external quality aspects such as agenda-setting, stimulating broad societal deliberation, and emphasising disruptive discourses that are often absent from system supporting mini-publics. Hammond argues that both play an important, but different role within a deliberative system.

In sum, the concept of *coupling* enables us to analyse the strength and directionality of the relationships a mini-public creates with other parts of the deliberative system, while the concept of *external quality* provides the criteria to assess whether such coupling does in fact enhance system-wide deliberation. None of the concepts mentioned above have yet been applied to a mini-public operating at the global scale.[9] Even advocates of connecting global mini-publics on climate change with established global governing bodies such as the UN, say little about the appropriate nature of those connections (Dryzek et al., 2011, p40; Vlerick, 2020, p312). This article aims to address that gap in research on the potential ways for mini-publics to achieve deliberative influence in global climate governance while maintaining critical distance from its dominant institutions.

## 4. Analytical approach and methods

Our analytical approach involved the use of empirical findings to support theory development in deliberative democracy (Elstub and Pomatto, 2022). As the first global citizens' assembly on any topic, the GA offers a unique opportunity (Yin, 2003, pp40-41) to examine empirically the extent to which findings about the influence of national and sub-national citizens' assemblies may be translated to the global level, to build democratic theory on how global-level democratic innovations work, and to identify practical learnings that may inform future global assemblies seeking to influence global climate governance.

The Core Assembly of the GA comprised 100 individuals selected by civic lottery from around the world, a sample that was intended to be reflective of a cross-section of the global population in terms of gender, age, education, and attitudes towards climate change.[10] Over 11 weeks, these 100 participants from 49 countries,[11] who received logistical support from Community Hosts and financial compensation, were provided with information about the climate and ecological crisis, listened to a range of experts, and discussed their views and ideas in facilitated small group deliberations and plenary sessions (Curato et al., 2023). Their conclusions were written up in the form of a People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth (Global Assembly, 2021) that was presented at COP26.

The data we used to answer our research questions were collected as part of a project led by the University of Canberra involving sixteen researchers from eleven universities (including the authors of this article) which aimed to comprehensively evaluate the GA (Curato et al., 2023). The primary data included project documentation such as the GA

Report (Global Assembly Team, 2022)[12] the GA website, information booklet for assembly members, transcripts of selected breakout and plenary deliberations, surveys of assembly members conducted before and after deliberations, as well as 68 interviews with organizers of the assembly, community hosts, and assembly members (see Curato et al., 2023, p155–164, for dataset details). The secondary data included the Evaluation Report (Curato et al., 2023) and technical papers on the GA (e.g. Malkin et al., 2023; Ross et al., 2023). Our access, not only to project documentation and transcripts of the deliberations but also survey data and interviews, provided a rich and nuanced body of contextual evidence on which to build our analysis. In the context of this research, we concentrated on a subset of the data, focusing on how influence was discussed in the secondary data and in the interviews.

We applied thematic analysis to qualitatively analyse these data, taking a deductive approach grounded in existing theoretical understandings of how mini-publics may link with influence to the wider deliberative system, as expounded in the previous section. Our analytical framework combines Hendriks' (2016) take on 'coupling' mini-publics with other parts of the deliberative system, and Curato and Böker's (2016) analysis of the 'external quality' of a mini-public in terms of how it enhances deliberation across the deliberative system as a whole. To answer our first research question on how the GA organizers and assembly members defined the intended influence of the GA, and perceived its actual influence, we relied primarily on content analysis of primary sources including interviews and surveys. To answer our second research question, evaluating the influence of the GA on the deliberative system of global climate governance, we applied the analytical framework outlined above. By answering those two questions, we were able to draw theoretical and practical insights to answer our third research question on the challenges and opportunities, and our recommendations, for future global assemblies seeking to have meaningful influence in global (climate) governance.

## 5. How did the Global Assembly organizers and members define and perceive influence?

To answer this research question, we draw on primary data to examine how the GA organizers and assembly members envisioned and perceived the GA's influence within global climate governance. While we summarise key trends here, there was significant variation across individuals regarding the level of ambition they felt the GA could achieve.

### 5.1. Envisaged pathways to influence

The organizers developed a Theory of Change outlining three 'routes to impact' by which the GA could bring about action on climate change and the ecological crisis. First, they aimed to use advocacy and the media to pressure governments, businesses and other power holders to take 'institutional actions' based on the assembly members' recommendations. This goal relied on key assumptions, including that 'citizens will make proposals commensurate with the crisis' (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p31).

Second, they hoped to inspire citizens to take individual and collective action through the idea of the 'cultural wave'. This involved 'artistic responses from across the world' to publicize the idea in the wider public sphere that there is 'a seat for everyone at the global [climate] governance table' (Mellier and Wilson, 2023). Representing an intention to foster social, cultural and political change by

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[9] Existing research on WWViews (see footnote 8) primarily focuses on the process (Mikami, 2010; Rask et al. 2019) or the outcomes (Chhetri et al.,2020) rather than on its place in the deliberative system of global climate governance.

[10] For more details on the process of randomly selecting 100 points on the globe using an algorithm weighted by population, and then finding and supporting one participant per location, see Global Assembly Team (2022) and Curato et al. (2023).

[11] We note that the number of countries unrepresented in the GA diminished the perceived and actual inclusivity of the process. The GA project also ran Community Assemblies to allow 'anyone on Earth' to participate, including from other countries (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p181). However, this important issue is beyond the scope of our paper which focuses on relationships with other global climate governance stakeholders. For further reflection on inclusivity, see Curato et al. (2023).

[12] The Report by the Global Assembly Team (2022) does not fully describe the GA organizers' methodology but is presented as a process documentation of their activities. We consider the Report a primary source insofar as its co-authors, the GA organizers, describe and express their reflections on the organizing activities.

disseminating the GA's broader goal of helping to democratize global climate governance from the bottom-up, this was the most multi-directional aspect of the GA organizers' approach to seeking influence, but it was not institutional coupling.

Third, they aspired to advance a new governance model for global decision-making, one that gets input from citizens' assemblies (Global Assembly Team, 2022, pp29-31). The means to achieve institutional influence was termed 'docking', which organizers defined as 'analogous to the intricate task of connecting the entrances of two spacecraft, […] the process of interfacing in a compatible way with existing institutional structures' (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p22). This analogy does not quite seem to reflect the GA organisers' intention to maintain independence and critical distance from the dominant institutions of global governance. While it might sound akin to 'coupling', the idea was very different from the process of 'convergence, mutual influence and mutual adjustment' envisaged by Mansbridge et al. (2012, p23). Although the GA was originally designed to speak to multiple policy processes (interview #6), 'docking' mainly targeted COP26. In Hendriks' (2016) terms, we would call this a shift from an aspiration toward multi-directional influence to a more unidirectional approach.

*5.2. Organisers' shifting definitions of influence*

We observe that the experience of implementing the GA led the organizers to dampen their expectations regarding its potential influence, 'shifting [the] goalposts' over time (Curato et al., 2023, p116). GA communications and outreach efforts before COP26 promised a lot, for example in the Press Pack, but as the event got closer, and especially after COP26, the organizers were more inclined to describe the GA as a prototype whose focus was to demonstrate that such a global assembly is possible, rather than framing it as aspiring to have a direct impact on global climate action. As an organizer told us (interview #2), '2021 was more about […] focusing on the quality of the process itself and developing a proof of concept of the tail-end […] rather than trying to focus on high-impact from the very first year'.

We argue that the GA organizers' perception of, and approach to seeking, influence was shaped by three main factors: their determination to remain 'independent'; timing and logistical constraints; and the extent of their ability to establish connections with external partners in the UNFCCC 'ecosystem'.

First, the organizers designed the GA as an independent and bottom-up exercise, led by representatives from civil society. In the organizers' report (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p34), independence was defined as a 'guiding value', with the intention being that governments and funders should have 'absolutely no influence over the process'. For example, a formal endorsement by the UNFCCC was not actively sought, in order to avoid co-option by powerful actors and to allow citizens more leeway in setting the agenda, rather than being given an explicit mandate and a set of predefined questions. The organizers also avoided steering the deliberations even where they might have helped assembly members identify policy-relevant entry points for influencing the negotiations. One GA organizer recalled debate among the team around whether to push for a discussion of fossil fuels and coal while the People's Declaration was being drafted, since this was expected to be a salient topic at COP26. Ultimately it was decided not to because '[t]here was a very active atmosphere of like, being cautious around how much we were inserting ourselves into the process' (interview #2). Although this decision was intended to allow assembly members the freedom to set their own agenda, it served to limit the policy relevance of the recommendations. For future assemblies, it would no doubt help facilitators to have clearer guidance on how to draw the line between supporting assembly members to identify entry-points for policy relevance versus being overly directive of their deliberations.

Second, mechanisms for achieving institutional influence had to be worked out while conducting the GA, as funding came later than expected: 'we were basically sailing the ship while we were building it' one

organizer said (interview #1). As another organizer admitted, it is 'hard for us to claim any kind of substantive impact in terms of climate policy, particularly because we […] announced our Declaration on day one of COP, and we all know the negotiation happened well in advance' (interview #3). In hindsight, the organizers noted that 'COP26 may have been an appropriate space to advocate for the methodology of a global citizens' assembly, but not the best place to inject new recommendations into the decision-making process of the 2021 conference' (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p248).

Third, the organizers, primarily deliberation and participation experts, had limited expertise on, or connections within, international climate negotiations, nor the time and resources necessary to meaningfully 'embed' the GA into this complex space (Curato et al., 2023). They were 'very much aware' that they lacked the 'skills and things we needed to really think about the impact or how to design it so we have the biggest impact possible' (interview #1). Several held a vision of global governance as diffuse, a 'kind of a wild wild west of governance' (interview #2). Institutional support had to be won over. One organizer (interview #2) remembered that 'in the early institutional advisory board meetings [the group advising the GA on docking into COP26[13]], there was a lot of translating our language around deliberative democracy [for those unfamiliar with concepts] like sortition, what it means for citizens not to be activists but rather random people coming from various walks of life'. Organizers also noted reluctance on the part of institutional partners to endorse a project before it had taken place, after which 'they felt a little bit safer to be working with us' (interview #2).

*5.3. Assembly members' perceptions of influence*

As for assembly members, there is evidence from surveys, post-COP deliberations, and interviews that many were surprised and disappointed at what they perceived as the People's Declaration's lack of impact. At the outset of the deliberative process, the majority of them (about 70 %[14]) felt the GA would make 'a lot of' or 'considerable' difference, but enthusiasm dropped following COP26, by which point little over 50 % of assembly members thought the GA would make 'a lot of' or 'considerable' difference (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p136). Qualitatively, some members expressed disappointment. One member 'expected more influence in the decisions made at COP26'. Another said, 'I think the Declaration is not operational enough, just one more great declaration of intent, with no actual effects afterwards' (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p165). Reflecting upon those results, the organizers admitted: 'In hindsight, we feel that we conveyed overly optimistic expectations of the Global Assembly's presence at COP26 to Assembly Members, which may have contributed to feelings of disillusionment.' (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p169). Nevertheless, many of the participants felt proud of their participation, identified tangible benefits, and felt it was worthwhile for themselves personally and for their communities (Curato et al., 2023).

## 6. To what extent did the Global Assembly have influence within the deliberative system of global climate governance?

Here we analyse the GA's actual influence within global climate governance. As set out in Sections 3 and 4, assessing influence extends beyond just identifying any immediate policy changes. Informed by both primary and secondary data, our analysis is structured around two core concepts: the strength and directionality of 'coupling' with other parts of

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[13] The group comprised representatives from the UNFCCC, the UN Climate Change High Level Champions team, the UK Government Climate Policy team, the UK Government COP26 Unit, and the Scottish Government (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p39).
[14] Of the 92 % of participants who responded to the initial survey.

the deliberative system (Hendriks, 2016), and the GA's 'external quality', meaning the extent to which it contributed to deliberation-making, legitimacy-seeking, and capacity-building in the public sphere and the wider deliberative system (Curato and Böker, 2016).

### 6.1. Evaluating the Global Assembly's efforts at 'coupling'

As outlined above, the ideal form of coupling between a mini-public and the wider deliberative system has been deemed to be 'loose' (neither too tight nor too weak) and 'multi-directional' as opposed to unidirectional or two-directional (Mansbridge et al., 2012; Hendriks, 2016). While the GA organizers wanted to connect with COP26, they were also determined to maintain independence from any authoritative institutions of global governance to avoid the risk of being co-opted. Their approach thus appears closer to *decoupling* than to loose coupling. The establishment of an institutional advisory board allowed only limited interaction between the GA and international climate decision-making arenas (Curato et al., 2023). This very loose coupling, combined with a broad remit which was not targeted toward particular policy decisions, meant the GA's recommendations could easily be ignored, as no institution had formally endorsed the agenda or committed to acting upon it. Indeed, the People's Declaration's recommendations were never formally endorsed by the COP or any individual governments, and there was limited reference to the GA by Parties to the UNFCCC (Curato et al., 2023). That said, the organizers presented the GA and its recommendations in several side events at COP26. The GA was endorsed by senior figures including UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, who described it as 'a practical way of showing how we can accelerate action through solidarity and people power', Alok Sharma, President of COP26, and Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland (Curato et al., 2023, p120).

The organizers' stated intention of 'docking' to the UNFCCC negotiating process was in practice a fairly one-way process of presenting the Declaration at COP26 at side events which run parallel to the formal negotiations, and seeking a receptive audience for it, similar to Hendriks' (2016) unidirectional coupling. The GA organizing team's awareness raising and policy advocacy approach similarly appears to interpret influence or 'impact' as a unidirectional dynamic. Indeed, their communication strategy focused more on raising awareness of the GA and explaining the concept, than on guiding world leaders on how to respond to the climate and ecological crisis. While some senior representatives of civil society made statements in support of the GA at COP26 (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p227), overall, few civil society groups were aware of the GA (Simangan and Pham, 2024).

Thus, if we conceptualise the GA's influence in terms of its efforts to 'couple' with relevant institutions in the global system of climate governance, we must conclude that these linkages were neither strong enough nor adequately multi-directional to be as influential as it aspired to be. As a result, the GA case ended up faltering between system supportive and system disruptive. While it attempted to engage with global climate negotiations, and could thus be classified in some respects as system supportive, the organizers' desire for independence meant that a mutually influential relationship with COP26 was never secured. Yet, by seeking recognition from the UNFCCC and other established climate governance stakeholders, the opportunity for the GA to question or disrupt the system also went unrealised.

### 6.2. Evaluating the 'external quality' of the GA

In terms of the GA's contribution to *deliberation-making*, that is, supporting and enhancing deliberation in the public sphere (Niemeyer, 2014; Curato and Böker, 2016), the GA assembly members articulated a narrower array of climate discourses than heard in wider public debate (Curato et al., 2023, pp53–57), with no climate denialism; a lack of more radical or transformative approaches to the climate crisis such as degrowth or decolonial discourses; and limited discussion of climate

change adaptation, a major concern for millions of people especially in the Global South. One reason for the lack of more radical, disruptive, and transformative discourses might be that the Knowledge and Wisdom Committee, who provided the scientific basis of the deliberations, and the GA organizers prioritized discussions on what could be done in the short term (Curato et al., 2023, p56). Nevertheless, the People's Declaration mentions the need to involve citizens in enforcing the Paris Agreement (article 1), asymmetric power relations in global climate governance (articles 3 and 6), climate change as a threat to human rights (article 4), and the need to codify ecocide as a crime (article 5). The Declaration also stresses some justice dimensions of the climate crisis (Curato et al., 2023; Dryzek, 2022).

One of the most apparent ways in which the GA organizers prioritized *legitimacy-seeking*, in other words seeking acceptance among the wider public, was in the emphasis they placed on the civic lottery process being (and being perceived as) random and fair, including livestreaming the selection by algorithm of 100 locations on the globe where assembly members would be identified. An arguable weakness in the GA's legitimacy lay in the tension between its centralised governance approach (led mainly by organizers from the Global North) and heavy reliance on local community hosts (the majority of whom were from the Global South) to identify and actively support assembly members (Curato et al., 2023, pp94–96).

In terms of *deliberative capacity-building*, the GA strengthened the capacity of many of its 100 individual assembly members and even their communities to understand and deliberate about climate change (Curato et al., 2023). The GA's wider efforts to support Community Assemblies including through development of the Toolkit (Global Assembly Team, 2021) is an encouraging sign that inclusion and capacity-building beyond those 100 assembly members was taken seriously. However, the concept of deliberative capacity-building also encompasses the ability to support the wider polity, including non-participating citizens and political institutions, to host inclusive and authentic deliberation (Curato and Böker, 2016). Given the GA was not commissioned by any government authority or multilateral organisation, and no authoritative institution had committed to listening or acting upon its advice, it is difficult to identify any significant change, or even learning experience, within any power-holding institution resulting from the GA.

Perhaps the GA's most significant contribution to promoting both *deliberation-making* in the public sphere and *deliberative capacity-building* in the wider polity was its demonstration of a new way for 'ordinary people' to have agency and input in international climate governance. Conceptually, it challenged the notion that citizens of electoral democracies are 'represented' at COPs either by their government or by civil society, with its offer of a more direct channel for (some) citizens to mediate the link between science and global policy. This, along with the Community Assemblies initiative, has the potential to influence global climate governance indirectly by giving momentum to deliberative exercises at national and local levels. The GA also highlighted some of the practical and ethical challenges involved in running a global-scale citizens' assembly, including how to deliberate across linguistic diversity and structural inequalities (Curato et al., 2023). Building on this experience, there has since been a burgeoning of academic research and civil society publications exploring the potential for citizens' assemblies to contribute to democratizing global governance including on climate change (see e.g. Malkin et al., 2023; Mellier and Wilson, 2023; Curato et al., 2024), which will in turn inform and influence future deliberative efforts on climate change.

### 7. Discussion: what would be the challenges and opportunities for a future global assembly seeking to achieve influence within global climate governance?

As this article shows, designing an influential global-scale climate assembly involves much more than just scaling up the logistics of a national-level climate assembly to span greater geographic, socio-

cultural, and linguistic dimensions. It calls for a deep understanding of how dynamics of influence can operate across the complex deliberative system of global climate governance. Our findings suggest that the design of any future global assembly would need to be founded on a more nuanced understanding of global deliberative systems, institutional coupling, and systemic influence.

### 7.1. Not 'wild west' but a deliberative system of global climate governance

As shown in 5, the GA organisers were well aware of the challenge posed by the democratic deficit in global governance discussed in 1. Indeed, the 'wild wild west' characterization indicates a sense of the daunting nature of the task of bringing about change in this messy reality. Yet it is a somewhat despairing analogy, and risks overlooking the multiple formal and informal ways that actors from the public sphere can and do exert influence in climate governance and hold authoritative institutions to account. Despite its complexity, global climate governance should not be dismissed as hopelessly chaotic. COPs for example have the potential to establish binding treaties, akin to the 1997 Kyoto Protocol or the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreements, and send powerful signals on how stakeholders should behave. Scholars recognise that global climate governance does not conform to simplistic models (see e.g. Depledge, 2022; Pattberg et al., 2022), and have explored a range of concepts such as 'polycentric' (Ostrom, 2010), 'experimental' (Hoffmann, 2011), and 'bottom-up' (Rayner, 2010) to describe and navigate its complexity.

That said, many global climate governance scholars focus primarily on the UNFCCC, and this was arguably a limit of the GA. The landscape of international climate cooperation is changing. With the Paris Agreement now in place (UNFCCC, 2015), the emphasis has shifted from the global target-setting of the Kyoto Protocol years to national decision-making, alongside renewed efforts to catalyse non-state and sub-national action (Patt et al., 2022). Some argue that the narrative at COPs has become more 'performative', meaning civil society actors need to fundamentally rethink how to achieve influence, and whether UNFCCC negotiations are the best place to focus (Aykut et al., 2021). Besides the 'mega multilateralism' of the UNFCCC, expanding and emerging approaches to international climate cooperation include South-South cooperation, sectoral and sub-national agreements, public-private partnerships, and commons-public partnerships (Patt et al., 2022; Jerchel and Pape, 2022). There is now a wider range of actors and institutions to reach, presenting new opportunities and challenges for seeking influence.

### 7.2. Not 'docking' but multi-directional coupling

The preceding account of the evolving global climate governance landscape, and our analysis in 6.1 of the GA's approach to institutional coupling, indicates that a sole focus on the UNFCCC is unlikely to be the most effective approach for a future global climate assembly. The idea of 'docking' needs to be reconceptualized. We point instead to the value of exploring opportunities for *multi-directional coupling.*

The idea of housing the governance of a future global citizens' assembly within any existing inter-governmental institution tends to raise concerns among civil society about the risk of elite capture and loss of autonomy. Yet, while it is important that a global assembly retains independence in order to ensure its legitimacy and integrity, the idea of designing it completely separately from global governance institutions and policy development processes entails the risk that its outcomes will not be relevant, useful, or listened to. Civil society groups arguably have as much right as corporate interests to seek dialogue with powerholders. In a globalized political economy characterized by high interdependence, any future global climate assembly needs to avoid being too 'loosely coupled' with, or even 'decoupled' from, global climate governance.

'Decoupling' and 'tight coupling' represent two ends of a spectrum; we suggest exploring a range of middle-ground options. Boswell et al. (2023) show that national-level climate assemblies in Europe have varied widely in the way they have 'coupled' with government institutions, from being commissioned by the President (France) to reporting to parliament (UK) or initiated by a non-state actor to inform election campaigns (Germany). They have also varied widely in terms of remit, including asking citizens to come up with general principles (Ireland, Germany), draft laws (France), or appraise specific policies (UK). Any future global climate assembly will need a detailed and up-to-date institutional understanding of where the meaningful entry-points could be to have influence within the complex and politically plural deliberative system of global climate governance, and to involve assembly members in setting its priorities (Elstub et al., 2021; Malkin et al., 2023).

Global assembly members could, for example, deliberate about UNFCCC agenda items, such as mitigation, adaptation, or loss and damage, while maintaining enough critical distance to consider alternative approaches to addressing them. They could also deliberate about climate-related topics dealt with by institutions beyond the UNFCCC, such as issues of climate-induced displacement relevant to international human rights institutions (Van Asselt and Zelli, 2018, p34) or trade measures discussed under the WTO that may encourage countries to control their emissions (Lumkowsky et al., 2023, p4). The work of global assembly members could be guided by expert witnesses from civil society groups and government representatives. Aligning the timing of deliberations to specific international decision-making schedules, such as energy trade negotiations, meetings of multilateral environmental agreements including COPs, or the submission of nationally-determined contributions to the UNFCCC, would also make a global climate assembly's recommendations more relevant to, and likely to be discussed by, decision-makers.

### 7.3. Not just 'policy impact' but systemic influence

A key finding from our case study is the importance of conceptualizing influence at the global scale as an iterative, *systemic* process. Mini-publics have traditionally been conceptualized as 'a one-shot injection into the policy process, based purely on the persuasive power of their outputs' (Boswell et al., 2023, p186), but in reality, the way policy changes is messy. Boswell et al. (2023, p194) conclude that efforts to develop 'forms of iterative influence' are likely to be more effective; and at least at the national scale, they find some emerging practices are ahead of the theory on this front.

As explored in 6.2, Curato and Böker's (2016) framework for evaluating the systemic influence of a mini-public allows us to consider not just what short-term political response a global climate assembly may provoke, or immediate policy change it may catalyse, but the extent to which it enhances deliberation within the public sphere and across the wider governance system. First, in terms of *deliberation-making,* a future global climate assembly should allow assembly members to identify, imagine, and interrogate a wide variety of positions and discourses, for example in the content and tone of the educational materials, the selection of expert witnesses, and the design of the facilitation process. While the agenda of any citizens' assembly needs to focus on policy-relevant issues, the deliberation process should encourage a plurality of perspectives to be considered, including in the wider public sphere.

Second, it will be important for any future global climate assembly to think through its *legitimacy-seeking* efforts explicitly, and to prioritize seeking legitimacy among the wider public sphere, especially in the Global South. The organizers must be clear about the distinctions between (but need for alignment among) the multiple purposes of communicating about the project, including raising awareness, raising funds, seeking political endorsements, building partnerships, and public education.

Third, a future global climate assembly might consider *capacity-*

*building* not just in terms of its responsibility to build the knowledge of, and inspire action by, individual citizens and the wider public, but also in terms of its potential to build the deliberative capacity of global climate governance institutions. Debates about the extent to which a future global climate assembly should be institutionalized, for example by 'housing' it within an established institution such as the UNFCCC or the UN General Assembly, should weigh up the potential for such capacity-building alongside other factors that are important for legitimacy and effectiveness, such as maintaining independence and critical distance, the need for a reflexive and transparent governance model, and access to predictable funding.

## 8. Conclusion

This article has analysed the world's first global-scale climate assembly to evaluate the theory that citizens' assemblies can help democratize global climate governance (Dryzek et al., 2011; Dryzek and Niemeyer, 2019; Vlerick, 2020). To shed new light on this debate, we assessed the extent to which the GA aspired, and was able, to influence global climate governance, and identified both conceptual and practical challenges. We argue that to effectively design for, and meaningfully evaluate, influence in global governance, a more nuanced understanding of this concept is required. Adopting a deliberative systems analytical approach allowed us to focus on the nature of the external relationships between the GA and other global climate governance actors, and the degree to which these links helped to achieve systemic deliberative influence by promoting deliberation-making, legitimacy-seeking, and deliberative capacity-building.

We found that relationships of institutional coupling were predominantly unidirectional, focused on influencing the UNFCCC, while the goal of maintaining independence from international institutions inhibited the scope for co-developing a more focused and policy-relevant agenda for the deliberations. The GA's contribution to deliberation-making in the public sphere was limited, articulating a comparatively narrow range of climate discourses. Beyond the positive experiences reported by many of the 100 Core Assembly members, wider capacity-building was minimal due to a lack of engagement with a diversity of organizations such as non-state actors, indigenous communities, and other marginalized groups.

The GA fared better in its efforts at legitimacy-seeking, with the democratic aspiration and logic of the process disseminated to, and acknowledged by, a number of global climate governance actors. This is important, as it should help sow seeds of openness to future global assemblies. The notion of seeking system-wide influence requires sustained, iterative, adaptive approaches, not dissimilar to the nature of climate action itself. One of the critical challenges with such a systemic approach - besides the fact that it will take time, patience, resources and expertise - is that it is very different from a linear understanding of how to effect change or deliver 'impact'. Improving the deliberative quality of a governance system is a fundamentally different goal from seeking tangible change to a policy, and may not resonate with potential funders, assembly members, or the wider public.

We hope these insights may inform the design and evaluation of future global assemblies. At the time of writing, we understand that a second Global Citizens' Assembly is now being planned by Iswe Foundation on the topic of 'People and Planet' (Iswe, 2024). With the support of funders, and partners including the Government of Brazil, it hopes to engage citizens through deliberations during the COP30 Brazilian Presidency in 2025–2026 (C. Mellier, personal communication, 7 Nov 2024). Its approach to seeking influence within the deliberative system of global climate governance should build on analysis of the first Global Assembly, including this study. Further research is also needed to capture the perspectives of other actors in global climate governance, and to examine the multiple possible institutions, mechanisms and entry-points that future global citizens' assemblies could explore in pursuit of a more inclusive and democratic global system of climate governance.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Wendy Conway-Lamb:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Formal analysis, Methodology, Conceptualization. **Pierrick Chalaye:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Kari De Pryck:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Stephen Elstub:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Emerson M. Sanchez:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Novieta H. Sari:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis.

## Ethics statement

## Funding statement

## Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

## Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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