# Decolonising Deliberation: Citizens' Assemblies as a Claimed Space for Forging Bottom-Up Democracy in Lebanon and Tunisia

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## Abstract

Tunisia and Lebanon, two states with distinct political trajectories, face converging crises of democratic governance marked by systemic corruption, economic hardship, and public disillusionment. Tunisia's democratic gains following the Arab Spring are now threatened by authoritarian regression, while Lebanon's consociational power-sharing system has led to institutional paralysis. Despite these challenges, both countries retain vibrant civil societies, histories of mobilisation, and a desire for participatory governance, offering entry points for democratic innovation. This article explores the potential of citizens' assemblies (CAs) in these contexts and their possible contribution to fostering new political imaginaries and forms of democratic participation within limited institutionalisation. While CAs have gained traction in the Global North as institutionalised deliberative processes, their application in politically fragile contexts in the Global South raises critical questions around context, adaptability, and legitimacy. Drawing on a four-year multi-sited fieldwork study and three case studies of CAs on energy justice in Lebanon and Tunisia, this article examines how CAs can be designed and implemented amid politically volatile environments and failing institutions. Ultimately, the article contributes to democratic debates on democratic innovation by highlighting the trade-offs between institutionalisation and transformative potential. It positions CAs not as universal models, but as agile democratic tools that can empower citizens and foster alternative bottom-up governance imaginaries.

## 1. Introduction

Interest in deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), particularly citizens' assemblies (CAs), has been growing globally over the past decade as part of a "deliberative wave," an expression coined by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to depict the rapid expansion of deliberative processes, especially since 2010 (OECD, 2025). While this growth has been concentrated in the Global North, participatory budgeting initiatives in Africa and Latin America have sparked increasing attention in the Global South, yet they remain marginal, with only about 4% of these DMPs tracked outside of OECD members. In the Global North, CAs, defined as "participatory institutions which bring together an inclusive group of lay citizens who deliberate together on a public issue so as to exert a public influence" (Vrydagh, 2023, p. 10), have increasingly moved towards greater standardisation and institutionalisation. Their popularity stems from addressing shortcomings within other deliberative practices, particularly around inclusive representation of participants, curated learning processes, and facilitated deliberation, all of which lead to informed decisions and recommendations aimed at public influence (Vrydagh, 2023). However, their transfer to countries in the Global South of diverse contexts raises concerns about the reproduction of Eurocentric assumptions that perpetuate epistemic violence and political inequalities (Curato et al., 2024). Such reliance on a standardised template often neglects historical, Indigenous, and communal traditions of deliberation and consensus-building.

This article examines how CAs might retain their core democratic principles while being attentive and responsive to the specific historical, cultural, and political contexts of the societies in which they are implemented, focusing particularly on the Global South. We adopt Boaventura de Sousa Santos's conception of the Global South as a relational category rather than a fixed geographical space, shaped by its structural subordination within an unequal global system (Santos, 2014). Drawing on four years of multi-sited fieldwork and our experience in organising three CAs in the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region, we explore the possibility and potential of CAs as democratic innovations to disrupt existing power structures, as opposed to supporting them. Our initial engagement with existing CA toolkits and guidelines revealed challenges that could not be addressed through minor adaptations alone. In response, we undertook a deeper engagement by critically examining the foundational assumptions behind these toolkits—questioning for whom they were designed, how they aligned with specific contexts, and where they diverged (Curato & Calamba, 2024). In doing so, we join emerging calls to decolonise deliberative democracy and argue for a situated approach to CAs that combines structural conditions with locally and culturally grounded practices of deliberation (Asenbaum et al., 2025).

More specifically, this article focuses on Arab countries in the SWANA region, also commonly referred to as the Middle East—a geopolitical formation shaped by both colonial-imperial discourses and contemporary usage in policy-making as well as academic research (Culcasi, 2023; Mamadouh, 2023). Despite its vast geographical scope and rich socio-political landscape, the region remains underrepresented in scholarly discussions on deliberative democratic innovations within the Global South. While political contexts vary

across the region, most Arab countries exhibit enduring authoritarian characteristics, in the form of military-backed regimes (e.g., Algeria, Egypt), authoritarian monarchies (e.g., Morocco, Jordan, the Gulf states), or post-conflict fragility (e.g., Lebanon, Syria). Historically, the region remained outside the "third wave" of democratisation of the 1960s and 1970s that reshaped Latin America and parts of Africa after decolonisation, leading scholars to characterise its regimes as marked by authoritarian "robustness" and "persistence" (Bellin, 2004; Hinnebusch, 2006). The 2011 Arab uprisings revealed widespread demands for political reform and participatory governance. However, 15 years later, most of those regimes continue to struggle with weak governance marked by elite capture, systemic corruption, together with limited civic participation and political freedoms (Mako & Moghadam, 2021). Our fieldwork is based in Tunisia and Lebanon, two nations with distinct political trajectories that face converging crises of democratic governance. Tunisia's democratic gains following the Arab Spring are now threatened by authoritarian regression, while Lebanon's confessional power-sharing system has led to political paralysis and deep socio-economic collapse. Despite these challenges, both countries share vibrant civil societies and histories of grassroots mobilisation, providing critical, if fragile, openings for democratic experimentation.

Our CAs have focused thematically on energy justice due to its centrality for citizens' concerns in the region, the strong connection between energy and democratic/undemocratic politics (Mitchell, 2009), together with global concerns about climate change. This endeavour to explore CAs as a method to think with and about energy in the region is thus one that recognises the intertwined relation between fuel politics, colonial and neo-colonial hegemony, and authoritarianism on the one hand, alongside the decolonial and democratising potential that new energy politics holds on the other hand. The region's energy sector reflects global, regional, and domestic inequalities—such as extractive relations with the Global North, the wealth of oil-rich Gulf states versus the scarcity in others, and unequal access within local populations, including refugees. While energy transition is at the centre of global action and discourse, being intertwined with aspirations for increased citizen participation and political democracy (Wahlund & Palm, 2022), local articulations of these transitions do not foreground "justice" in proposed visions for energy futures. Citizens' democratic contributions to envisioning such futures are particularly absent, curtailed by state-centric fossil fuel narratives or neoliberal models for renewable energy solutions promoted by top-down international programmes, not only with expertise primarily from the Global North, but also with a limited regard for local dynamics and knowledge (Mason, 2019). CAs thus represent an attempt to centre justice and public participation, challenging technocratic boundaries and creating space for articulating an alternative regional vision for energy futures that is grounded in local realities and inclusive of citizens' experiences (for a full account, see Shehabi et al., 2021).

Recognising these interconnections between energy democracy and democratisation more broadly, the concern of this article is specifically in relation to CAs as a methodology with the theme of energy in mind. The aim is to answer the question: What is the potential of CAs as democratic innovations in states where representative democratic institutions are fragile or failing? In authoritarian contexts where deliberative practices occur despite—rather than through—formal state institutions, we explore the potential for CAs in forging bottom-up democracy and the limits of their institutionalisation. To do so, we focus on the planning and design stages of three CAs in the politically fragile contexts of Lebanon and Tunisia, examining ways in which they could inspire new imaginaries of governance and foster stronger communities for democratic learning and practice. The article is presented in three key parts. Firstly, we outline our theoretical framework, situating CAs within broader discourses on democratic innovations and their adaptation through

decolonial perspectives (Sections 2 and 3). Secondly, we describe our methodology and positionality as organisers and researchers from Lebanon, the UK–Bahrain, and France–Algeria, engaged in promoting locally grounded deliberative citizen engagement in the Global South (Section 4). Thirdly and finally, we present our key findings, reflecting on conceptual insights as well as practical recommendations for adapting the CA model for Arab countries (Sections 5, 6, and 7). We conclude with lessons for democratic innovation in politically fragile environments more broadly.

## 2. Narratives on Deliberative Democracy

### 2.1. The "Deliberative Wave" and the Institutional Spread of Mini-Publics

The rise of deliberative democracy as a normative ideal and set of institutional practices is largely associated with political theory and "experiments" emerging from the Global North. Its canonical lineage often points to Athenian practices and Enlightenment thought (Bächtiger et al., 2018), although archaeological and anthropological scholarship reveals far older and more geographically diverse origins. Deliberative democracy's perceived potential to address the crisis of representation has prompted the proliferation of "democratic innovations" directly engaging citizens in deliberations, of which mini-publics have found a particularly strong resonance, being engaged in a phase of institutionalisation (Escobar & Elstub, 2017), understood normatively as the establishment of ties with decision-making processes or public institutions.

DMPs include citizens' juries, consensus conferences, deliberative polls, and CAs. While they all share common characteristics, according to Vrydagh (2023), CAs are grounded in three key principles that address shortcomings found with other deliberative practices (see Curato et al., 2024). Firstly, most deliberative spaces attract self-selected participants with prior knowledge or interest in the topic, often resulting in unrepresentative outcomes that may serve a partisan or ideological purpose or lead to elite co-option. In contrast, CAs prioritise inclusive participation, using selection methods that mirror the wider population and amplify marginalised voices. Secondly, public consultations on specialised issues can exclude lay citizens lacking technical expertise. CAs address this through structured learning processes and professionally facilitated deliberation, enabling participants to make decisions based on what Curato (2024, p. 6) calls "considered judgment." Thirdly, CAs are designed to produce recommendations and channel them toward influencing public decision-making. While their direct policy impact remains under study, they are widely regarded as the deliberative method most committed to inclusive, citizen-centred political/policy change (Curato, 2024).

Some CAs have evolved from one-off forums to permanent advisory bodies within parliamentary systems or local decision-making, such as in Ireland, France, or Canada. One example is the Ostbelgien Model in the German-speaking Community of Belgium, the first permanent CA as of 2019 (Macq & Jacquet, 2023; Podgórska-Rykała, 2023). The formalisation and institutionalisation of CAs and other DMPs have opened up promising avenues through which to address democratic deficits; yet, they also risk entrenching standardised practices that may not translate well across different political, cultural, or socio-economic contexts. Understanding this tension is key to unpacking both the appeal and the limits of CAs as they "travel" and are foregrounded globally.

## 2.2. Mini-Publics and the Standardisation of Deliberative Practices

Far from being shielded from critiques, DMPs and CAs have been challenged on three broad fronts: Their representativeness (Spada & Peixoto, 2025), their limited policy impact (van der Does & Jacquet, 2023), and the rigidity that flows from highly codified institutional designs (Bussu et al., 2022; Fung, 2005; Smith, 2009). Proponents of DMPs emphasise their legitimacy and procedural integrity and highlight the importance of their design features. Often, their processes are designed to generate recommendations on public policy by involving everyday citizens in a time-limited (from a few days to a number of weekends) but intensive process of informed deliberation. While there is no consensus in the literature about what ideal impact CAs may lead to, this is often assessed in relation to public institutions and decision-making.

A parallel body of work warns that the very process of institutionalising deliberative democracy has resulted in both the commodification and commercialisation of democratic practices (Hammond, 2021; Johnson, 2015; Lee, 2014). Asenbaum (2025), for instance, argues that deliberative institutions that treat participation as a technical exercise sanitise and depoliticise the inherently dynamic and context-specific nature of democratic participation. The latter, he maintains, exists through spontaneity, conflict, and situated meaning. Lee et al. (2015, p. 31) describe the "deliberation consulting industry" that markets these commodified processes to governments, non-profit organisations, and corporations by framing them as mechanisms for producing "social profits," subtly shaping public discourse with market-oriented goals. Oleart's (2023) critique of the EU's flagship experiment—the 2022 Conference on the Future of Europe which brought together hundreds of randomly selected citizens—illustrates how the so named "citizen turn" sidelined civil society and muted genuine political contestation in favour of a depoliticised, consensus-driven model, ultimately reinforcing the EU's persistent model of "democracy without politics" (Oleart, 2023, pp. 1–3).

Within this context, government-commissioned assemblies risk becoming controlled spaces in which political elites set the agenda, frame the questions, and curate the evidence, resulting in predetermined remits and largely symbolic citizen engagement (Elstub & Khoban, 2023). As Curato (2024, p. 8) cautions, such assemblies can function as "system-reinforcing tools... assimilated into the same political system that deliberative democrats seek to transform" (see Hammond, 2021). Little research examines how the global standardisation and promotion of such commodified DMP and CA models around the world affect local democratic cultures or constrain their transformative power. In response, organisers—especially in the Global South and initiatives such as the Global Citizens' Assembly—call for reclaiming the system-disrupting potential of CAs by delinking them from state mandates and reorienting them toward activating citizens' deliberative capacities and reimagining democracy from the bottom up (Curato, 2024; Hammond, 2021; Mellier et al., 2025).

## 2.3. Understanding Deliberative Practices in Non-Democratic Contexts

Other strands of the scholarship on deliberative practices have explored their existence and application in non-democratic contexts, confirming that both are not exclusive to deliberative democracy and simultaneously exist in radically different spaces, serving different functions (Baogang, 2023; Curato & Calamba, 2024; Li, 2022; Woo & Kübler, 2020). Blueprints for democratic innovations have circulated across borders, including within regimes that have little or no interest in genuine citizen engagement and power-sharing. However, acknowledging this diffusion should not negate non-democratic regimes' capacity

for simultaneously manufacturing or hybridising deliberative mechanisms of their own. According to such research, those innovations correspond to an initial typology of innovations identified in democratic contexts (Smith, 2005). Given the use of these practices, in parallel with the "deliberative wave," scholars have scrutinised specific regimes, such as China, which gathered most research endeavours (Baogang, 2023; Li, 2022; Woo & Kübler, 2020). While examining China, Cuba, and Libya, three authoritarian regimes, Baogang (2023) argues that, unlike electoral democracy, which threatens ruling elites, deliberative forums are preferred by authoritarian regimes as mechanisms for enhancing governance because they provide citizens with opportunities for participation without relinquishing power. As such, mini-publics under such regimes often serve a dual purpose: On the one hand, they facilitate a controlled citizen engagement, and on the other, they reinforce state control, state legitimacy, and regime survival.

## 3. Decolonising Theoretical and Practical Applications of Deliberative Democracy

### 3.1. Colonial Critiques of the Foundations of Deliberative Democracy

Two decades ago, Smith (2005) warned about democratic innovations that fail to embed themselves into broader political contexts. Yet these critiques rarely acknowledge how the standards of deliberation are shaped by colonial legacies and Western colonial thought emanating from liberal ideals ("the Western Enlightenment" and "Rationality"), sidelining other epistemologies (Ballestrin, 2013; Banerjee, 2022; De Mignolo, 2009; Ibhawoh, 2025). Existing literature exposes pronounced epistemic injustice, where studies overwhelmingly spotlight cases from the Global North, whereas cases from the Global South are often treated as peripheral exceptions, with knowledge interpreted from a Western perspective and extracted to advance a universalised Northern research agenda (Curato, 2025; Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025; Shilliam, 2021). Such processes delegitimise diverse political traditions and ultimately reproduce the very inequalities and injustices that deliberative democracy claims to overcome (Banerjee, 2022). This article aims to address such disparity by shedding light on the organisation of CAs in Arab countries in a way that centres a different understanding and application of its principles, from the consultation phases to delivering the assembly itself. From this perspective, decolonising deliberative democracy in practice can serve as a vehicle for advancing epistemic and social justice, recognising "the democratic subject as an agent empowered by its inquisitive, reflective, and deconstructive capacities" (Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025, p. 4).

### 3.2. From Democratic Innovations to Democratic Spaces

Recent scholarship argues that limiting the analysis of democratic innovations to state-sponsored institutional design is too narrow, because it overlooks the wider arenas in which citizens actually deliberate and contest power, such as social movements or civic initiatives (Bua & Bussu, 2023; Bussu, 2019). Alternatively, it proposes the idea of "democratic space," in other words, any arena, formal or informal, where collective decisions are forged. This conceptual turn recognises that (a) institutionalised forms of deliberation do indeed coexist with assemblies which operate in conditions of exclusion, marginality, and resistance; (b) those diverse histories of deliberation long pre-date contemporary forms and toolkits; and (c) power circulates through overlapping "invited" (legitimised by institutions and incorporating grassroots and allies) and "invented" or "claimed" (initiated by grassroots and allies directly confronting the status quo) arenas (Cornwall, 2002; Gaventa, 2006). As Curato et al. (2024, p.68) note, some consider these "claimed

spaces" as "forums for discussion that 'prefigure' deliberative democracy where shared visions for alternative futures and strategies for action are decided based on equal, rigorous and sustained discussions."

Asenbaum (2025) argues that the dominance of DMPs in the democratic innovation literature has narrowed our learning from other strands of democratic theory. A few traditional examples of these in Arab countries are the principle of *shura*, an ancient consultation principle which originates from Islamic governance and is still institutionalised in modern political systems in various forms, such as in Lebanon and across the Gulf; or the *diwaniya* or *majlis*, deliberative spaces for men to discuss familial/communal and political affairs, held in private homes but open to the public and frequently attended by government officials, in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain (Weiner, 2016). In this vein, democratic innovations—or in this regard spaces—are part of wider democratic spaces historically, shaped by different means of governance together with various political and cultural practices. Accordingly, we widen our conceptual lens when thinking of CAs as a democratic space by finding the temporal and spatial cracks and openings in non-democratic systems where deliberation takes place at different scales.

### 3.3. Invented and Claimed Spaces: Social-Movement Assemblies

With this in mind, it is possible to look beyond the "deliberative wave" and the institutionalisation of CAs, to consider alternative types of assemblies as "claimed spaces"—also named by Cornwall as "sites of radical possibility" emerging "at the margins" (Cornwall, 2002, p. 3). Bayat's (2013) concept of "social nonmovements" provides a useful framework to interpret these dynamics of social organising. He argues that, particularly in Arab countries, meaningful political change has emerged not through formal state institutions, but through years of diffuse, everyday and dispersed acts of resistance (what he terms "quiet encroachment") by informal workers, youth, and women in conservative societies, who gradually reconfigure urban life and the status quo of state authorities by claiming spaces and resources. What appeared as a spontaneous revolution with the 2011 Arab Spring was, in fact, the cumulative outcome of these "social nonmovements." During and in the aftermath of the 2011 Arab Spring, "claimed spaces" have operated in a multitude of ways. Across the region, online spaces and social platforms were transformed from their "intended commercial and social functions" to spaces used for deliberation and social mobilisation (Pfister & Godana, 2012, p. 4). In 2011, in Syria and Bahrain, deliberations in more secure and semi-private spaces, in small informal groups, whether online or in-person, were identified as one of the drivers of mobilisation, at a time when "the mere act of getting together to discuss current events is [was] a political crime" (Baczko et al., 2013, p. 6; Shehabi & Jones, 2015). These assemblies, although not institutionally embedded, functioned as democratic spaces in their own right; they were formed through collective resistance and shaped by decolonial and anti-neoliberal values. Bayat's analysis reminds us that these spaces are not always visible or formally recognised, but nonetheless represent potent forms of collective agency.

## 4. Research Methods

This article adopts an extended case study methodology (Burawoy, 1998), enabling a rich, situated analysis of complex social phenomena embedded in specific political and cultural contexts (George & Bennett, 2005; Gerring, 2007). This is essential when studying CAs in Arab countries, where deliberative processes cannot be separated from the broader dynamics of institutional fragility, political contestation, and socio-historical specificities. We view the case not as a lesser form of inquiry, but as a mode of producing context-dependent

knowledge with critical value for both theory and practice. This approach also aligns with our dual roles as organisers and researchers, supporting an ethnographic, reflexive, and iterative engagement with the field. Rather than aiming for generalisability through replication, the case study generates situated knowledge that reveals how deliberative practices emerge, adapt, and acquire meaning in diverse local contexts.

The findings presented in this article are based not only on our observations, experiential learning, and critical reflection arising from organising CAs in Arab countries, but also from drafting and adapting an Arabic-language CA toolkit that speaks to the regional socio-political realities. They are based on the following organisation of CAs between 2019 and 2025:

1. A CA on electricity and energy justice in the neighbourhood of Hamra in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2020;
2. A CA on energy cooperatives in the neighbourhood of Hamra in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2025;
3. A CA on green hydrogen in Gabes, Tunisia, in 2025.

While energy, the theme of the CAs, is central to our research interests, our attempts at organising a CA in the region also aimed at understanding if this method of deliberation is of value where representative democratic institutions are fragile or failing. This meant we approached all our activities in organising the CAs with a critical reflective lens. We mapped key players in countries where we were working and presented the CA methodology in consultation, collaborator and one-on-one meetings. We kept field notes and minutes and conducted reflection and feedback meetings, informed both by literature on the concepts surrounding CAs and emerging learning, to conceptualise the theme of each CA and to evaluate the methodology.

As both process organisers and reflexive participant-observers, our research draws on three interconnected processes. Firstly, we organised one pilot CA in Beirut, Lebanon, between 2019 and 2020. This involved conceptualising new and translating existing CA materials, a series of consultation meetings, and continual adaptation to Lebanon's political turbulence during this period—including the country's economic and financial collapse, the 2020 Beirut explosion, political instability, and the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite these difficulties, the CA was convened in October 2020 with 13 energy experts, 4 facilitators and 33 members of the general public (Shehabi & Al-Masri, 2022). We collected survey data from the participants on their experience and conducted an independent evaluation.

Secondly, we engaged in the preparatory phase for two forthcoming CAs in the region to be held in September 2025. This involved two broad consultation meetings, one on CA as a methodology (attended by 10, recorded), one with energy experts (attended by 10, recorded), and over 53 meetings and consultations with civil society activists, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) representatives, researchers, and energy experts conducted either online or in person during two field visits to Lebanon—where one of the researchers also resides—and one field visit each to Tunisia and Jordan. Ultimately, Lebanon and Tunisia were selected as sites for the CAs; hence, planning is underway with local partners for the convening of one CA in Lebanon on collective energy solutions, and another CA on green hydrogen production in the south of Tunisia in the third quarter of 2025, each for 50 assembly members and over two weekends.

Thirdly, we developed a practitioner-oriented Arabic toolkit for organising CAs in Arab countries. This toolkit emerged through a process of translation, adaptation, and localisation, informed by critical reflection on deliberative democracy theory and the practicalities of fostering meaningful citizen participation in diverse

Arab contexts. It remains a living document that will be refined based on lessons learned from the upcoming assemblies.

This article's primary data consists of exhaustive meeting records and field notes documenting procedures and reflections from the three processes outlined above. These notes capture our adaptations to the shifting political landscapes of the region, our engagements with a wide range of collaborators, and our evolving understanding of the CA model's applicability in Arab countries, alongside engagement with theory on deliberative democracy. In particular, records reveal instances where local realities prompted critical revisions to the standardised CA format and catalysed innovative methodological developments. Adhering to a "dwelling in" theory or a "reflexive model of science," we embraced both our engagement and reflexive process by deploying "multiple dialogues to reach explanations of empirical phenomena" (Burawoy, 1998, p. 5), creating many occasions of engagement with theory and reflection on learning from the field, without a coded process of analysis. Consistent with Nagar's (2014) emphasis on integrating critical reflection throughout the research process rather than relegating it to post-fieldwork analysis, our methodology involved ongoing reflexive practices. Additionally, two dedicated reflection meetings, facilitated by a colleague independent of the process, provided structured opportunities for collective analysis. Following Curato and Calamba (2024, p. 6), we simultaneously approached this work as "embedded social science researchers" and process designers. However, rather than treating these positionalities as distinct, we emphasise continuities between our roles as researchers and activists (Ethnography and Knowledge Collective, 2021), underpinned by a long-term commitment to intersubjective and unfolding engagement (Fabian, 2014; Scholte, 1972).

## 5. The Possibility of a CA for the SWANA Region: Between Constraints and Opportunities

The planning of CAs in countries across the SWANA region reinforces our understanding of how inherited political and social contexts profoundly shape the boundaries of deliberative processes. As organisers, we found ourselves planning both with and against a series of shifting constraints, some stemming from external factors such as geopolitical instability, others rooted in each country's complex, layered socio-economic realities. These dynamics not only shaped the feasibility of organising CAs but also defined their potential democratic value. Navigating such conditions necessitated the exercise of situated judgment, involving critical reflexivity regarding our positionalities and the technical commitments towards donor funding while maintaining a commitment to embedding the project within a decolonial framework aligned with its transformative aims. We present below the frequent attempts we engaged in to organise independent CAs in two Arab countries, the reasons behind the unsuccessful attempts, and what that implies regarding the constraints and possibilities which must be considered by CA organisers.

### 5.1. Two CAs in Lebanon in a Radically Changing Landscape

This interplay between opportunity and constraint became evident during the planning of Lebanon's pilot CA on electricity during October 2020, in a country under a caretaker government amid financial collapse and the Covid-19 pandemic. The year-long organisation of such a process demonstrated the potential for deliberative processes even under conditions of acute state failure. However, attempts to launch a second CA exposed deeper complexities within Lebanon's political landscape, particularly as tensions from the war with Israel intensified. One proposed site, the Borj al-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp in Beirut, initially

appeared promising, given one of the organisers' existing networks and prior engagement. The project was especially compelling for its potential to offer long-marginalised refugee populations—excluded from any form of democratic representation for over 75 years—a voice in shaping policies directly affecting their lives. Yet consultations with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) revealed that control over electricity provision was deeply embedded within a militarised and factionalised political terrain, exacerbated by reduced international funding and heightened volatility following the war in Gaza. In such contexts, external interventions risked entanglement in local political dynamics, while widespread mistrust of foreign-funded initiatives posed further barriers. These dynamics highlighted that the inaccessibility of certain spaces to deliberate stems not from public apathy, but from the high political stakes surrounding even basic governance issues.

Other sites, such as Saida and Tyre, presented different but equally complex challenges. In Saida, entrenched patronage networks meant any initiative required implicit approval from political elites. The success of a CA there depended less on community interest than on elite calculations. As Gaventa (2006) argues, deliberative projects often require entry into "invited spaces" sanctioned by power holders, which risks their co-optation or failure if they are seen as challenging the status quo. In Tyre, a local NGO was launching a participatory project to rethink post-war reconstruction, an initiative that closely aligned with the CA's ethos. Yet ongoing Israeli military activity in southern Lebanon created acute security concerns. Residents' priorities were understandably centred on survival, shelter, and immediate recovery. The temporality of this crisis did not provide any opportunity for the CA's longer time horizon. Here, urgency displaced deliberation, and we were forced to confront the ethical and practical limits of what can be asked of communities in precarious conditions.

We ultimately returned to Hamra in Beirut, the neighbourhood where the pilot CA was implemented. In response to chronic power cuts, rising fuel prices, and the absence of state reforms, citizens increasingly turned to individual renewable energy solutions. In Hamra, a neighbourhood committee was formed to explore the potential for a community solar grid, connecting buildings with space for solar panels to those without. Through our existing relationships with members of the committee, we saw an opportunity to build on the recommendations of the first CA convened in 2020, particularly the need for collective renewable energy solutions, while also exploring a cooperative energy model tailored to Lebanon's legal and political context. As these CAs are organised independently from state institutions, we process organisers remained committed to exploring the different possibilities for holding a CA on energy in a way that responds to the local constraints and maintains the safety of participants, while proving a potential in complementing existing efforts on the issue and therefore creating added value.

## 5.2. Towards a Regional Framework for CAs

To develop an "Arab-oriented CA" toolkit, we sought to test the CA methodology in a second country in the region. Most Arab countries present immediate constraints to such experimentation. Gulf monarchies and countries such as Egypt and Syria operate under consolidated authoritarian regimes that do not tolerate autonomous public deliberation as it directly contradicts the logic of political control (Cammack et al., 2017). Jordan, with its relatively more open environment, was considered a second site. One proposition was for the CA to tackle Jordan's controversial gas deals with Israel from an energy justice perspective, but that was not a viable topic. The political red lines around normalisation with Israel are well known in Jordan, and discussing them publicly could provoke state repression. Here, the state's implicit veto over certain topics fundamentally

obstructed the CA's feasibility and highlighted that the freedom of assembly cannot be assumed. This is the case for many Arab countries where governments apply a zero-tolerance policy for assemblies over topics that threaten the power of the state (Fakir & Yerkes, 2018). This further underline CAs' value not only as spaces to deliberate but, crucially, as spaces to assemble—something that cannot be taken for granted in many authoritarian or semi-authoritarian states (Carothers, 2021).

Tunisia emerged as the most viable context for a deliberative process. Despite democratic backsliding under President Kais Saied, the country maintains a vibrant civil society and an ongoing interest in public deliberation, particularly as participatory governance practices were enshrined in the post-revolution constitution, though they have recently been undermined (Al Bawsala, 2024). Environmental activism had been gaining momentum, especially regarding green hydrogen agreements, criticised for reproducing green colonialism and green grabbing (Ben Ammar & Ammar, 2024; Hamouchene & Sandwell, 2023). Local organisations actively engaged in energy discussions, advocating for a more socially just and sustainable energy model that prioritises citizens' needs and well-being, provided an opportunity to anchor the relevance of a CA on energy. Although the context was relatively enabling, it was far from neutral or straightforward, presenting a fragile but feasible space for deliberative practice, albeit carefully tailored to local dynamics. We had to navigate complex tensions between institutional distrust, security repression, and grassroots enthusiasm, all within an uncertain and changing political landscape.

Our experiences from the many iterations of planning the CAs described above demonstrate that, in such contexts, every decision is a negotiation over space, topic, legitimacy, and risk. Unlike stable democratic settings, where deliberation can become routinised or even bureaucratised (Johnson, 2015), in Arab countries, deliberative processes must be contextually situated and continually earned. This is particularly true given the politically fragile governance in many of these countries, where the feasibility of hosting a CA depends not only on technical readiness or local interest but also on a volatile mix of political, security, and geopolitical factors. Deliberation, in this context, is less a tool of institutional reform and more an act of democratic resistance.

## 6. Rethinking the Form of CAs Through a Decolonial Practice

Recognising that all policy discussions in the SWANA region are inherently political, we were confronted with the need to rethink the form and function of CAs. Rather than transplanting models developed in the Global North, we engaged in an ongoing process of translation, reflection, deconstruction, and adaptation—turning what initially appeared to be a technical methodology into a deeply political and epistemological exercise of reimagining deliberative democracy for each context (Asenbaum et al., 2025).

### 6.1. Localising the CA for Legitimacy and Sustainability

In regions where developmental projects are often entangled with foreign interests, questions of legitimacy are paramount (Ferreira & Allegretti, 2019). In Tunisia, for instance, renewable energy projects are frequently criticised as neocolonial ventures driven by European interests, resulting in the disempowerment of local populations and the degradation of their lands and resources (Ben Ammar & Ammar, 2024; Hamouchene & Sandwell, 2023). Lebanon's political landscape has long been shaped by foreign interference and NGO proliferation, often viewed as weakening the state's capacity for self-governance (Fawaz & Harb, 2020).

Whereas the legitimacy of CAs in Global North contexts is assumed from state institutions that commission them, in the Global South, and particularly in Arab countries, CAs are initiated by efforts from civil society and academia (Curato et al., 2024). This responds to the democratic backsliding nature of countries in the region where state-led initiatives risk co-optation or symbolic ritualism (Baogang, 2023; Curato & Calamba, 2024). Participative efforts that promote citizen engagement in these contexts will often emerge from the bottom up and independently from authorities to promote civil society activism that can, in turn, push for a more democratic space (Mellier et al., 2025). Recognising these dynamics and our positionality as academics in international institutions, we acknowledged that the success of CAs was dependent on legitimacy stemming from local ownership. Through our consultation phase, we introduced the CA to local collaborators (charities, small trader associations, neighbourhood initiatives, religious sites, municipality representatives) not as a finished product, but as a tentative, evolving tool, explicitly open to critique, adaptation, and contextual reconfiguration to reflect and respond to local realities (Curato & Calamba, 2024).

These consultations served as spaces of co-learning, where local actors could engage critically with the CA model and where we could learn from their experience in advocating for greater democratic participation, with the CAs themselves thought of as an experimental cumulative process of learning. Feedback gathered during these dialogues directly informed subsequent iterations of the toolkit. Central to this phase was identifying a local anchor organisation capable of assuming ownership of the CA from design through implementation and follow-up. Our aim was to build long-term sustainability by equipping the local organisation with the skills and knowledge needed to lead future assemblies independently, thereby reducing dependency on external implementers as well as funding and minimising the need for extensive adaptation in subsequent CAs. Once the local anchor organisation was identified, our role shifted from direct implementers to advisors.

Anchor organisations were selected based on various criteria: the ability to convene collaborators across ideological divides, organisational capacity, responsiveness to political or logistical risks, and a thematic or methodological alignment between the CA and the organisation's work. In Lebanon, a local organisation focused on environmental justice was selected for its commitment to innovative participatory methods and its vision of building alternative economies through cooperatives. In Tunisia, the process of identifying the local anchor organisation required greater scrutiny due to the country's complex civil society landscape, with the chosen organisation having to gain broad stakeholder endorsement. Embedding the CA locally, both in the political context as well as in the organisational infrastructure, was conceived not merely as a procedural step but as a form of spatial and temporal embeddedness whereby, despite an absence of institutionalised support, introducing the CA as a methodology in its decolonial form contributes to strengthening local agency and initiates a path towards sustainable models of participatory governance (Bussu et al., 2022).

## 6.2. Innovating Through Adaptability, Against Standardisation

At the time of implementing the first pilot in 2020, CAs were still emerging in the Global North as a formal method, with only a few toolkits and frameworks available. We engaged in a months-long process of not only a linguistic but also a conceptual translation. In Lebanon, the term "citizens" in the title proved exclusionary for large (approximately 20%) refugee populations not legally recognised as citizens but deeply impacted by energy policies. In response, we adopted a more inclusive framing around "residents." This early experience revealed the limitations of Western-based toolkits and showed that any toolkit intended for Arabic-speaking countries could not merely be an adaptation of the technical processes but required

epistemic engagement with local political realities. In the process of deconstructing the methodology to reconstruct a version that is relevant to the local landscape, we recognise two core innovations distinct to CAs that provide value over other participatory and deliberative practices: (a) representation and the inclusion of marginalised voices through demographic representation and epistemic diversity; and (b) curated learning processes that support professionally facilitated deliberations to reach informed recommendations (Escobar, 2019). All other elements of the CA methodology were treated as contextually contingent rather than universally applicable. In contrast to the tendency toward standardisation in Global North contexts, agility is to be prioritised to accommodate dynamic and often volatile political landscapes that require immediate responsiveness and continual iterative adaptation (Curato et al., 2024).

A number of key components thus required significant reflection and revision:

- **Commissioning body**: There is a key difference between CAs in the Global North and those in the Global South. Instead of being state-commissioned, the CAs for Arab countries will usually be initiated by activists, academics, or civil society actors. This can be seen as an opportunity to re-explore the democratic potential of CAs when they are designed bottom-up, centring people both in the design as well as recommendation phases, instead of top-down (Hammond, 2021; Mellier et al., 2025).
- **Consultation phase and issue selection**: Extensive fieldwork and community consultation are necessary to map collaborators, identify locally relevant issues, and assess political feasibility. In Tunisia, particularly given that we were not native to the country, the consultation phase extended over six months and required a field visit to establish trust and connections. For every opportunity, we asked: At this moment, in this context, is a CA possible and useful? Importantly, our aim was not to "test democracy" as a procedural experiment but rather to use deliberative methods to respond to real, grounded needs, such as just energy transitions. Given the authoritarian characteristics of many regimes in Arab countries, we align with Curato et al.'s (2024) recommendation to prioritise topics that focus on localised, infrastructural, or service-based concerns—areas more likely to be tolerated and seen as less politically threatening. Even so, our experience proved that in many Arab countries, energy is a politically charged topic and often serves as an arena for the negotiation of power.
- **Governance**: Governance is conceptualised relationally, emphasising relationship-building over compartmentalised roles. Successful CAs in the Global South, as Curato et al. (2024) argue, depend on trust-based networks rather than formalised bureaucratic channels. Escobar and Henderson (2024) highlight the importance of engaging a community of practice made of key collaborators to co-develop the CA's purpose, as well as the principles against which the success of the CA will be assessed, thus foregrounding collaboration and collective critical reflection.
- **Sortition**: Traditional sortition methods based on census data proved unfeasible due to outdated or politicised demographic data (e.g., Lebanon's last census was in 1932). Instead, trusted community leaders play a gatekeeping and mobilising role. In the absence of reliable data and given communities' tendency to refer to already prominent voices—those with existing social capital—representative sortition becomes a significant challenge. However, this limitation can present an opportunity to identify deeper inequalities embedded within these communities and find innovative ways of addressing them through genuine representation and inclusion. Hence, a deeper understanding of local dynamics and power relations is essential for the recruitment process to be effective.
- **Knowledge and evidence:** The dominance of Western technical expertise in sectors such as energy is challenged through the intentional inclusion of alternative epistemologies from narrative, embodied,

and historical knowledge. In Lebanon's pilot, for instance, a historian's account of the electricity sector's colonial history provided participants with critical contextual understanding, while a Syrian refugee's practical knowledge of energy efficiency as an electrician added value often overlooked in technical analyses.

- **Additional feature:** The CA planning process is also conceived as an opportunity to capitalise on the significant effort invested in its design by producing durable resources—such as recorded educational materials—that could extend the assembly's impact beyond the event itself. Initially developed in response to the constraints imposed by Covid-19, this feature also addresses longstanding critiques concerning the often-limited timeframe available for meaningful deliberation within CAs (Curato & Calamba, 2024; Johnson, 2025).

A central element for planning CAs in Arab countries is relationship-building, which is seen not only as a means to procedural legitimacy, but as an end in itself (Bussu et al., 2022; Starblanket & Stark, 2018). In contrast to liberal-democratic ideals that prioritise individual autonomy, a decolonial democratic practice foregrounds relational interdependence, communal care, and long-term engagement (Asenbaum et al., 2025; Escobar & Henderson, 2024). Crucially, we recognise that mere "localness" does not guarantee ethical practice. Extractive dynamics, where local knowledge is instrumentalised to legitimise external projects without genuine inclusion, remain pervasive. In both Lebanon and Tunisia, trust was cultivated through the organizers' years of engagement and collaborations, laying the groundwork not only for the successful implementation of CAs but also for the development of enduring communities of practice on energy as well as democratic experimentation.

## 7. The Future of a CA for Arab Countries: Bottom-Up Democratisation

### 7.1. Claimed Spaces and the Politics of Imagination, Dialogue, and Disagreement

Contrary to dominant understandings of CAs as state-sanctioned democratic innovations, the CAs studied here align more closely with "claimed spaces" and "sites of radical possibilities" (Cornwall, 2002; Curato et al., 2024). Rather than seeking to be integrated within state architectures, these assemblies were carved out by activist networks and civil society actors operating at the margins of formal political processes. As such, their value lies less in their capacity to influence policy and more in their potential to convene diverse actors—community organisers, technical experts, Indigenous knowledge holders, and activists—who rarely share deliberative spaces. In this sense, we redefine the normative impact of CAs in the Global North (see van der Does & Jacquet, 2023 three-phase assessment) and instead approach them as "added value" (van der Does & Jacquet, 2023). By reflecting on the post-assembly phase of the pilot in Lebanon, we recognise CAs as spaces for shared visioning. As stated in the final report on energy justice in Lebanon, the CA sought to foreground people's needs and visions in shaping energy-related policies and create a vision that is more shared (Shehabi et al., 2021). This is not to suggest, though, that the deliberative is devoid of agonistic exchanges—there is still space for disagreement, as much as affect. CAs are not then used to create pacifying democratic spaces just for audience members to participate. Instead, they make space for critical discussions that question all visions, including those of political and activist groups. Furthermore, they legitimise future advocacy based on members' informed recommendations and produce learning as well as alternative models and solutions that could be used for replicability.

While the impact of CAs on policy continues to be debated in the Global North, focus in the Global South—particularly in the SWANA region—requires a different lens. Here, eroded social contracts, widespread mistrust in institutions, and the absence of safe or accessible public fora all shape how deliberative practices take root. Grounded in these political realities, we have moved away from measurable outcomes and institutional uptake toward cultivating spaces for dialogue, imagination, and political possibilities.

## 7.2. Situated Sovereignty and the Limits of Institutional Integration

Rather than providing a blueprint for institutional integration, the planned or attempted CAs across Lebanon, Tunisia, and Jordan articulate a mode of political action premised on reclaiming deliberation in the absence or refusal of institutional engagement. In none of the contexts was sustained state collaboration achieved. In Lebanon, previous collaboration with state representatives in closed fora did not translate into willingness to engage with the CA format. Official representatives rejected the possibility of having citizens (or "non-experts") deliberate in a rational way on topics perceived as highly technical—such as energy. Another explanation for their refusal to participate was to avoid engagement with a public that, at the time, was openly expressing frustration with the political establishment and calling for systemic change. In Tunisia, during the consultation phases, potential civil society partners shared their concerns about contributing to projects framed around "democratic participation," as it may risk legitimising the democratic façade of Saeid's regime. These dynamics, unfolding within broader contexts of suspicion (LeVine & Malmström, 2019), where motivations are constantly questioned and initiatives viewed through a lens of mistrust, raise a deeper question: When implemented in fragile or authoritarian contexts, do CAs bypass the state or risk inadvertently reproducing it? We contend that practicing deliberative democracy in a decolonial manner necessitates exploring alternative practices of sovereignty, assuming control over knowledge, and exercising the collective right to self-determination (Banerjee, 2022; Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025).

We also reflect on the trade-off between reach and viability. While national-scale deliberation risks triggering political anxieties or co-optation, smaller-scale efforts may struggle to achieve visibility. The CA must therefore be understood as a form of situated sovereignty—an expression of collective agency within the bounds of what is politically imaginable in each context. While the "small is beautiful" ideology (Lee et al., 2015; Schumacher, 1973) has been criticised for romanticising local interventions that rarely produce systemic change, experience in the region suggests a different logic. Here, we concur that the value of CAs as democratic spaces may operate closer to Bayat's theory of "social nonmovements": organised in the margins and with limited (or no) involvement from state institutions, acting less as formalised processes and more as spaces for dispersed, everyday acts of resistance that slowly and gradually unsettle dominant power structures in contexts marked by eroded social contracts (Bayat, 2013).

Despite lacking state endorsement, the imaginaries that emerge from these assemblies are not anti-institutional—they are deeply invested in envisioning functioning, inclusive, and responsive public institutions. This echoes what Ipek (2018) has described in Lebanon as "the longing for a nation." As one CA organiser noted: "We almost have to organise them in the margins, but the imaginaries and the vision that drive the CAs include public institutions answering those needs." In this light, CAs represent what research literature describes as "institutionalisation from below"—a decolonial, grounded form of political embedding that prioritises community ownership, iterative legitimacy, and alignment with justice-oriented movements over formal state integration (Asenbaum et al., 2025; Bussu et al., 2022).

## 8. Conclusion

There have been at least 700 CAs, as recorded by the OECD, as part of the "deliberative wave," responding to an increasing democratic deficit in the West's electoral politics and growing concern over climate change. This article set out to ask not only whether CAs on energy can function as meaningful democratic innovations in Arab countries with eroded representative institutions, but also what it means to institutionalise a CA in non-democratic contexts, with weak public institutions and, at times, authoritarian restrictions. As experiments in the radical and emancipatory potential and limits of the CA method, the empirical focus on the planning and design of CAs in Tunisia and Lebanon challenges the universalist and standardised approach to CAs in the Global North. Based on our experiences and insights, it is important to adapt to local realities and histories, cultural practices, and forms of collective decision-making. Bringing people together across sectarian, class, and generational lines nurtures critical thinking and allows participants to imagine alternatives beyond the immediate crises they may face. Recognising the importance of power, identity and inequality, deliberative spaces must be designed with an ethic of care, co-creation and equity, mitigating rather than reproducing systemic injustice. As Mendonça and Asenbaum (2025) observe, placing Global South perspectives at the centre of study on deliberative democracy turns the focus on contestation, power, economic redistribution and a broader sense of "what counts," and, we may add, what is possible in authentic deliberative spaces (p. 14)—most importantly, as our CA in Lebanon showed, an articulation of alternative political imaginaries.

A critical decolonial perspective must situate CAs cautiously within a broader ecosystem of resistance, recognising both their possibilities and limitations. In response to the growing universalist methods that seek to standardise a one size fits all approach to CAs, this article proposes a regional guide to CA organising, not as a singular framework but as a set of principles and variables to consider and adapt based on context, using examples from the three CAs we have designed. Tunisia and Lebanon are very different politically, and so is every other Arab country. Our work, even after five years, is still at an early stage. Our ultimate aim is to progressively help social and political actors think more explicitly about deliberation across themes that have been subject to obstacles and sociotechnical barriers, such as energy, humanitarian aid, reconstruction and water. Such designs must reflect a context-sensitive understanding of power, dynamics and values, adapting tools such as sortition, duration and expert knowledge into existing practices. A viable process, therefore, hinges on a frank look at purpose, resources and safety, as well as nurturing a learning network that spans funders, organisers, participants and wider publics. Likewise, dialogue must remain fluid and self-critical to keep technical concepts under scrutiny, not as a technical "add-on" (Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025, p. 13). In short, deliberation can only flourish when it grows out of its cultural soil and is studied across settings as part of broader "deliberative cultures" (Sass & Dryzek, 2014, p. 4).

CAs become truly meaningful when they are embedded in the lived struggles of the communities they aim to serve. We did not contend with the question of scale in this article, and for practical reasons our CAs have been on a sub-city scale. However, we do note the criticism that a "small is beautiful" focus of participation projects (Lee et al., 2015; Schumacher, 1973) limits their reach, as citizens may shape their realities while elites still decide on the bigger questions. Yet, although such modest interventions rarely trigger sweeping change on their own, these tangible "small victories" remain key for broader democratic transformation (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 495). In contexts where civil society is weak or co-opted, forging links between assemblies and legislative or policy processes, as well as social and grassroots movements, is difficult but vital. Assemblies

do not replace political organising, direct forms of activism, protests or collective action, but build on insurgent origins by offering a relevant, inclusive and deliberative infrastructure in a "claimed space" that can inform and energise wider struggles, setting visions of alternative worlds that are being sought.

A crucial question is whether such spaces, however valuable, can effectively address deep structural inequalities and power imbalances in post-colonial societies. Can a well-designed deliberative forum, dismantle entrenched economic systems, challenge geopolitical dependencies, achieve land restitution, or fundamentally alter racist or patriarchal social structures? The answer is, of course, no. Does this make them decolonial, or simply a metaphor for decolonisation? We view CAs as an expression of collective will echoing Hammond's (2019) view of deliberation as an activist political theory whose purpose is "to fight domination in all its forms" (p. 5). It is decolonial in the sense of being an essential tool of resistance in the arsenal of decolonisation. In Arab contexts, where formal political systems often obstruct participation, democracy is frequently constructed in defiance of the state—not through it. CAs, as claimed and constructed spaces, may, therefore, be most valuable not as policy instruments but as expressions of alternative decolonial imaginaries—sites where democratic legitimacy is redefined from the ground-up (Dryzek, 1996).

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