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Liberal and Deliberative Democracy in the Global South: Models, Functions, Practices

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Abstract

Deliberative democracy is a consolidated strand of political theory, its current expansion sustained by ongoing experiments in political practice. Initially, model-based theories framed deliberation as a corrective to shortcomings in liberal democracy. More recent approaches shift the focus away from theoretical models and towards the political problems that deliberation can solve. Yet these approaches, too, suffer from a "Global North bias," centering theories and cases predominantly from wealthy Western countries. This article turns the gaze towards the Global South to counter this bias. I bring Mark Warren's problem-based approach into dialogue with evidence from Demo.Reset, a project that documented deliberative practices by 105 practitioners across 22 countries in the Global South, to provide a situated and differential account of the functions of deliberation across global contexts: foster pluralism, develop coalitions, and enable collective action. This category-building effort aims to inform democratic theory with global, plural reflections.

Keywords

collective action; deliberation; deliberative democracy; liberal democracy; Global South; pluralism

1. Introduction

Deliberative theory first emerged as a challenger to shortcomings in liberal conceptions of democracy. Liberal models, as enacted in electoral-representative democracies, restrict political participation to the act of voting in elections and disregard more meaningful engagement in the decisions that affect citizens' lives (e.g., Dryzek, 2002, p. 50; Saward, 2003, p. 41). But elections are insufficient to authentically represent the diversity of positions across the population (e.g., Fishkin, 2009), given that the mere "counting of votes…prevents citizens from being able to demonstrate the intensity of the preferences that they hold"

(Elstub, 2018, p. 189). Lower political mobilization, especially among structurally disadvantaged groups who see little chance to improve their conditions via aggregative methods, endows already better-positioned groups—those who "speak louder"—with greater influence (Cohen, 2009, p. 248). Moreover, although citizens elect their representatives, vast political decision-making power remains "safely left in the hands of non-majoritarian and counter-majoritarian institutions…independent from the electoral cycle," who still hold the power to "set the terms of public debates," "to shape the political agenda of legislatures, and to establish multiple veto points" (Palumbo, 2023, pp. 65–66).

Deliberative democrats embarked on a theoretical project to surmount those limitations, placing public participation and reasoned exchange at the core of democratic norms. Developing upon participatory conceptions of democracy, deliberative democrats underscored citizen engagement, equality, and considered judgment. They maintain that the giving and receiving of arguments should be at the center of "public reasoning" (Cohen, 2009, p. 250). Inclusive, argument-based dialogue allows citizens to reflect on their own views, learn from others, potentially transform their preferences, and thus produce more legitimate (Dryzek, 2002), robust (Cohen, 2009), epistemically diverse (Landemore, 2012), and just (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004) political decisions.

Over decades and "generations" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 4; Elstub et al., 2016, p. 142), from foundational conceptualization efforts to sophisticated empirical experiments, deliberative democracy has evolved into one of the fastest-growing, most vibrant fields in political studies. In recent years, however, efforts have increasingly focused on better understanding the precise democratizing function of deliberation. While democratic theories typically contrasted "deliberative" to "aggregative" models (Warren, 2017, p. 40), recent inquiry has attempted to move beyond norm-centered models towards plural accounts of democratic norms and practices (e.g., Asenbaum, 2025; Gagnon et al., 2021; Lancelle-Webster & Warren, 2023).

Despite the growing "global reach" of deliberative democracy (Curato et al., 2020, p. 60), theory and empirical research have not reflected truly global developments. Foundational studies in the field were informed by political practice in the Global South, such as Kerala's *gram sabhas* (Heller et al., 2007) and Brazil's Participatory Budgeting (Avritzer, 2006). But, over the past two decades, studies of deliberation have increasingly focused on deliberative practices hailing from the Global North. The current popularity of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) illustrates this point. These deliberative forums operationalize the mandates of inclusive and reasoned dialogue through careful design, participation by "civic lottery" or sortition, curated expert information, and facilitated discussions, to craft policy recommendations that reflect citizen preferences after considered judgment. DMPs have earned international attention due to highly publicized cases like Ireland's Constitutional Assemblies (2012–2023) and France's Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (2019–2020). Some maintain that a "deliberative wave" (OECD, 2023) has taken over liberal democracies and beckons deliberation as a "cure" to the democratic malaise (c.f. Elstub, 2018, p. 187). Yet DMPs have taken place almost exclusively in the Global North; only 2% of cases in the OECD (2023) and 8% in the CRC1265 (2021) databases occurred in the Global South.

This "Global North bias" in contemporary deliberative democratic scholarship and practice has not gone unnoticed. The field's hyperfocus on deliberative practices that are dominant in the Global North renders current scholarship inaccurate and incomplete in its representation of how deliberation effectively takes place, on the ground, across the world. This has elicited recent calls to decenter (Scudder, 2021; Williams,

2020), decolonize (Banerjee, 2021; Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025), and ground (Curato et al., 2025) deliberative theory in truly global experiences. Such calls further invite scholars to consider the underpinnings of democratic theory under a critical light, broadening the sources and approaches behind theory and category-building (c.f. Asenbaum, 2022). This article is situated among these calls, and asks: How does deliberation supplement liberal democracy's shortcomings in the Global South? What are the democratic functions of deliberation?

To answer these questions, I first briefly review the deliberative critique of liberal democracy, the advantages envisaged for deliberation, and recent efforts to move beyond model-based theories to better account for the role of deliberation. Where model-based approaches center normative claims around certain practices and institutions, problem-based approaches instead identify *functions* that *practices* must fulfil to enact democratic norms (Scudder, 2021; Warren, 2017). However, these efforts to rethink democratic theorizing (Asenbaum, 2022; Asenbaum et al., 2023) are constrained by their Global North bias. I flag the current under-exploration, under-documentation, and under-representation of global deliberative practices in the field, which frame this article's contribution to ongoing reflection in the field.

In response to those limitations, I propose that, to understand the democratic functions of deliberation, we must turn the gaze to the Global South. Section 3 outlines the ethos and approach of the grounded normative theory and democratic theorizing, which guide this article. I bring Mark Warren's problem-based approach (2017) into dialogue with evidence from Demo.Reset, a project documenting deliberative practices by 105 organizations across 22 Global South countries (Extituto, 2023, 2024). The term "Global South" is not used here uncritically; rather, it signals geopolitical and epistemic hierarchies and preexisting inequalities that condition how those doing deliberation situate themselves, how they conduct deliberation, and what goals they pursue with it.

I find that Warren's (2017) functions more accurately explain how Global South practitioners deploy deliberation than liberal and deliberative model-based theories. These findings are discussed in Section 4. I show that practitioners across the Global South use deliberation as part of wider participatory repertoires for both strategic and substantive ends that resonate with Warren's three categories: empowering inclusions, forming collective agendas, and reaching collective decisions. I present practitioner accounts to illustrate what forms of deliberation take place in the Global South, and what their functions are: as a way of promoting pluralism, as a channel for coalition building, and an enabler of collective action. This analysis contributes to a more accurate, differential, and situated account of deliberative practices in the Global South. I conclude with a reflection on three implications deriving from this category-building exercise: open lines for further inquiry on the explanatory capacity of situated categories, the need to account for the strategic use of deliberative practices within wider participatory repertoires, and the relevance of documenting and studying Global South practices without romanticizing or essentializing them.

2. Conceptualizing the Democratic Function of Deliberation

This section briefly reviews the development of deliberative theory as a rebuttal to shortcomings in liberal conceptions of democracy, followed by critiques of model-based democratic theory, and the current shift towards understanding the democratic functions of political practice. Within the latter strand, this study is inscribed alongside emerging calls for pluralizing democratic theory beyond Global North visions and practices.

2.1. Liberal and Deliberative Models

Deliberative democracy first emerged as a response to limitations of concepts and practices of liberal democracy with regard to its goal of enabling "the rule of the people" (Cohen, 2009, p. 248; Fishkin, 2009, pp. 48–49; Held, 2006, p. 232ff; Warren, 2017, p. 70). For the purposes of this article, liberal democracy is understood as the "Anglo-American template" (Palumbo, 2023, p. 4) that entails (a) periodic general elections, (b) party competition, and (c) constitutional guarantees, including the rule of law, separation of powers, and civil liberties. This definition echoes Dahl's (1979/2020) classic formulation of "acceptable hybrids" of polyarchy, where necessary components of the liberal democratic mandate are fair, periodic, and competitive general elections among organized political forces. Similarly, in David Held's classic account, liberal democracy entails "elected 'officials' who 'represent' the interests or views of citizens within the framework of the 'rule of law'" (2006, p. 62). These three elements—elections, representation, and the rule of law—"provide citizens with a satisfactory means to choose, approve, and control political decisions" (Held, 2006, p. 70).

Deliberative theorists maintained that electoral-representative democracies, the modern political enactment of liberal models, failed to deliver on their democratic promise. Aggregative procedures like elections in mass democracies are exclusionary because they fail to meaningfully capture and represent the diversity of views, positions, and identities in a political community. In a pivotal book on the tension between liberal and deliberative democracy, John Dryzek critiqued the design of liberal democratic institutions around individual entitlements, which disregards the "social embeddedness" of individuals (2002, p. 8). He proposed deliberative democracy as a "critical" alternative that is "well equipped to respond to challenges presented by deep plurality and difference in the political composition of society" (Dryzek, 2002, p. 30). Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson likewise contended that liberal democracies take individual preferences "as a given" and prioritize translating them as "fixed positions," neglecting how those preferences come to be (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 13–14). Deliberative democracy, instead, is grounded in the assumption "that deliberators are amenable to changing their judgements, preferences, and views during the course of their interactions, which involve persuasion rather than coercion, manipulation, or deception" (Dryzek, 2002, p. 1).

How does deliberation supplement those shortcomings? What is the specific democratic function of deliberation? Early theorizations emphasized different normative models and explanations. For Gutmann and Thompson, deliberative democracy "affirms the need to justify decisions made by citizens and their representatives" to one another (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, p. 3). In their view, deliberation foregrounds the pluralistic nature of societies, where disagreement necessarily arises, and promotes resolving those disagreements by encouraging individuals to "find justifications that minimize their differences with their opponents" and, in so doing, "come to accept the legitimacy of a collective decision" (Gutmann & Thompson, 2004, pp. 3–10). Similarly, Dryzek saw the critical potential of deliberation in *bridging* across difference and conflict, "encouraging reflection upon preferences without coercion" and openness to "preference transformation within political interaction" (Dryzek, 2002, pp. 8, 10). Cohen defined deliberative democracy as "a political arrangement that ties the exercise of collective power to *reason-giving* among those subject to collective decisions" (Cohen, 2009, p. 248, emphasis added).

Over time, "conceptual innovations" (Palumbo, 2023, p. 157), practical exercises of deliberation, and empirical research have contributed to expanding visions of how deliberation can supplement or improve the *legitimacy*

of political decisions. Carefully designed deliberative practices have sought to translate the "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, p. 2). In this vision of deliberation, collective reasoning and procedural guarantees are expected to supplement the acceptance of outcomes. Others, like Iris Marion Young, argued that deliberation should instead emphasize the *inclusion* of historically marginalized groups and voices, making it a tool to address political inequality (Young, 1996, p. 125). Others, yet, maintain that deliberation improves the *epistemic* quality of decisions: diversity should lead to better decisions, resulting in "not just fairer but overall smarter collective decisions" (Landemore, 2012, p. 2).

2.2. Models to Problems to Functions

Both liberal and deliberative democrats situate political participation within norm-centered models. Model-based theorizing is helpful because it "clarifies normative presuppositions, enabling critical debate about better and worse forms of democracy" (Warren, 2017, p. 40)—it provides an "a priori theory of what democracy is and, therefore, both where it should be going and how it gets there" (Gagnon et al., 2021, p. 3). Theoretical models identify the "changing meanings" of democracy over time, pinning down "key positions and arguments," revealing "its underlying structure of relations" (Held, 2006, p. 6). As such, they are both descriptive and prescriptive—they tie together "ideas of democracy" and the "social and historic conditions" of their occurrence (Held, 2006, p. 8). For instance, while there is consensus that deliberation entails more than plain dialogue, there is variation in how its conceptual elements are defined. What exactly deliberation requires, what end it can and should pursue, are thus described differently across models, which outline diverse combinations of ideal (e.g., Cohen, 2009) and practical (e.g., Neblo, 2015) conditions for it to take place.

But model-based democratic theories have been increasingly challenged. They have been criticized for constructing a narrow focus on select concepts and relations, preventing theorists from engaging with other factors at play beyond their model's theoretical core (Warren, 2017, p. 39). While models help "identifying and justifying specific norms and practices," they have also overly "emphasized one kind of practice or norm" (Lancelle-Webster & Warren, 2023, p. 98). This can result in proponents "defending their preferred democratic practice against competitors," which can make model-based theorizing "unproductive" (Scudder, 2021, p. 244), potentially "preventing innovation in democratic theory" (Asenbaum, 2025, p. 3) by centering single norms and practices and disregarding elements and interactions external to the model.

These critiques have inspired alternative approaches to democratic theorizing. For instance, Michael Saward maintained that "We do not need more 'models of democracy'" but rather a *proceduralist* and *reflexive* approach "focused on the shaping of binding collective decision-making" that "accepts that in principle outcomes can be regarded as legitimate if they have been produced by a certain procedure" (Saward, 2003, p. 161). He describes deliberation as just one "device" (Saward, 2003, p. 167) that can lead to legitimate public decisions, alongside electoral, direct, and other democratic practices. In Fung's (2006) design-oriented theorizing, frameworks and categories are developed close to empirical cases. In his view, citizen participation—including deliberation—can pursue a range of goals, including legitimacy, effectiveness, and justice. Asenbaum (2025), in turn, shows the benefits of approaching participatory processes from a range of theoretical traditions that can inform and improve design and practice.

This article dialogues with these recent efforts to decenter prescriptive models and instead center approaches to theorizing that are informed by real-world practice and complexity. To that end, I follow Warren's (2017) problem-based approach. He proposes to shift the gaze away from norms at the center of models, and toward the democratic *problems* that political practices tackle. He asks: "What should we expect deliberation to accomplish within a democratic political system?" (Warren, 2017, p. 40) and identifies three responses to this question: (a) empower inclusions of those affected by collective decisions, (b) form preferences and interests into collective agendas and wills, and (c) transform those agendas and wills into collective decisions (Warren, 2017, pp. 44–45). These are the *functions* of participation that are conducive to the "rule of the people." *Practices* are the organized forms of engagement that can fulfill those functions—"ideal-typical social actions" and "socially intended behaviors" (Warren, 2017, p. 43), among which deliberation is but one of many.

2.3. The Global North Bias

Deliberation is increasingly celebrated as a solution to the serial crises of liberal democracies (c.f. Curato et al., 2020). However, much of that current attention is directed to a few forms of deliberation, mostly practiced in the Global North. Participedia (n.d.), the largest global database on citizen participation, provides a good example. Despite its initial goal of creating "a very rich and encompassing data set of democratic innovations all over the world" (Fung & Warren, 2011, p. 347), to date, only 126 out of 907 documented cases that use deliberative and dialogic methods are based in the Global South. The popularity of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs), such as citizens' assemblies and citizen panels, further illustrates the problem: the stricter the definition of deliberation, the greater the space granted to Global North practices in knowledge production. Take the OECD's "deliberative wave:" the claim that such a "wave" is taking place derives from a database documenting 733 DMPs, of which only 15 have taken place outside the Global North (OECD, 2023). Similarly, the CRC 1265 global database lists 2169 DMPs, of which only 179 are located in the Global South (CRC1265, 2021). Looking exclusively at climate assemblies, KNOCA only lists four beyond the Global North, two in Brazil and two in the Maldives (KNOCA, n.d.); drawing on Participedia and LATINNO, a recent study arrives at a total of nine: three in the Maldives, two in Brazil, and four across Latin America (Curato et al., 2024, p. 86).

This Global North bias is not limited to empirical evidence but also manifests in the conceptual histories that deliberative democrats draw on. Historically, democratic theory has been "deeply rooted in Western thought" (Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025, p. 2), its "philosophical canons deeply rooted in the Western Enlightenment and modernization ideals of reasoning, equality, and publicity" (Min, 2014, p. 1). The field "traces their intellectual heritage through the western canon, beginning with Aristotle and passing through a chain of luminaries, including Mill, Rousseau, Kant, Dewey and others," but such "spurious self-descriptions" fail to treat "non-western political thought as a source of insight when fashioning deliberative ideals, practices and institutions" (Curato et al., 2020, p. 60). The consequence is that "some democracies are better known, and more widely practiced, or entertained as possible future practices" (Gagnon et al., 2021, p. 5). The problematic consequences of Western-centric knowledge production have been tackled in depth by postcolonial and decolonial theorists (e.g., Connell, 2014, p. 211), most recently also in relation to the field of deliberation (Banerjee, 2021, p. 287; Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025, pp. 6–8).

Limited engagement with visions and practices from the Global South poses at least three challenges to democratic theory. First, if the Global North approaches and practices of deliberation are assumed to be the norm, alternative forms of deliberation in the Global South may be considered exceptional and therefore of limited theoretical value: they are viewed as case studies whose learnings are limited to their contexts and regions. They are of particular, not general, interest. Such under-exploration prolongs exclusionary academic practices and, even if involuntarily, reproduces the Global North's purported epistemic supremacy (see Connell, 2014, p. 219).

Second, the under-documentation of global practices results in an incomplete and therefore inaccurate body of evidence and reflection about deliberation. Instead, our knowledge about the Global South is limited to (a) well-documented or flagship practices, which limits accounts to few cases, (b) self-reported and self-documented practices, which may not be the most typical or relevant in the given context, or (c) studies of singled-out traditions, concepts, and practices, which do not provide a systematic overview and place the burden of documentation on individuals with the interest or capacity to report on them.

Third, the under-representation of global practices in existing knowledge production limits not only the way deliberation is theorized, but also how it is assessed. Dominant conceptions of deliberation determine what deliberative processes count, and how they are assessed. But deliberation across the world may not be best understood and measured by approaches and tools that—explicitly or implicitly—derive from highly privileged contexts such as the Global North. This can create unfair conditions for internationally competitive fundraising and unequal chances in comparative evaluations.

These empirical and theoretical gaps do not reflect a lack of deliberative theorizing and practice elsewhere, but rather a lack of attention to the global diversity of deliberation in the current dominant scholarship. Ten years ago, Jensen Sass and John Dryzek challenged the field to diversify its accounts, pointing out that "a fuller understanding of political deliberation requires comparative and historical studies of diverse contexts," studies that could provide "new insight into the forms deliberative practice can take and the conditions under which it can flourish" (Sass & Dryzek, 2014, p. 4). This article responds to this call, seeking to reduce the epistemological gap in existing deliberative scholarship and contributing to tackling the three challenges outlined above. It does so by centering theory development around deliberative practices in the Global South, informing categories with empirical reflection. In "theorizing from the bottom up" (Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025, p. 12), this effort aligns with ongoing calls to counter the Global North bias by decentering (Scudder, 2021; Williams, 2020), decolonizing (Banerjee, 2021; Mendonça & Asenbaum, 2025), and grounding (Curato et al., 2025) deliberative theory.

3. Mapping Deliberative Practice

What is the democratic function of deliberation? To explore this question, I bring existing theorizing about the functions of deliberation with evidence from those directly engaged in deliberative practice across the Global South. I follow the principles of grounded normative theory (see Ackerly et al., 2024) and democratic theorizing (Asenbaum, 2022). Both approaches "blend empirical study with normative theorizing" (Johnson, 2022, p. 53) with the aim of generating *situated* theoretical accounts that foreground engagement with experiences historically sidelined in theory-making, so that the resulting analysis remains "rooted in the lived experiences of radical democratic practice" (Asenbaum et al., 2023, p. 3). I examine original data from

Demo.Reset, a project led by Colombian non-partisan organization Extituto de Política Abierta and funded by the National Endowment for Democracy. Since "most deliberative action takes place in civil society" (Beauvais, 2018, p. 148), the main actors leading deliberative practices are best placed to report on what form of deliberation is deployed and what it aims to achieve.

The term "Global South" is not used uncritically in this article, but rather due to its ability to foreground geopolitical and epistemic hierarchies while acknowledging diversity. It is meant to identify places peripheral to dominant political and economic powers, underscoring "the historical legacies of colonialism and its consequences for creating unequal global conditions in terms of standards of living" and "access to resources" (Curato et al., 2024, p. 7). Yet the term remains contested. Critics point out the radical variation across political systems, economic development, societal, and cultural features in places and cases grouped under this single label. Generic categorizations that bundle such different contexts together may further imply "negative connotations" (Alam, 2008, p. 89).

Despite criticism, the term remains widely used in global politics, including international organizations like the United Nations Trade and Development Agency; by scholars (e.g., Curato et al., 2024; Raventós, 2008); and by practitioners and activists themselves (e.g., Democracy R&D, n.d.). Most importantly, I use this term because Demo.Reset respondents identify with it. A Latin American practitioner explained they use the concept as "an emancipatory political category" for communities "where systems of inequality have historically been installed," indicating global territories "that share historic dispossession consequences, but also solutions to simultaneous crises" (Extituto, 2024, p. 118). In Demo.Reset, the Global South encompasses places affected by "deep inequality gaps to access and diversify the participation of communities traditionally underrepresented in decision-making scenarios; among others," challenges that "hinder the effective implementation of healthy practices for deliberative democracy" (Extituto, 2024, pp. 22–23).

3.1. Demo.Reset

Demo.Reset sought to "describe and characterize the set of differential practices for participation and deliberation…in the expanded Global South" (Extituto, 2024, pp. 23–25). It centered perspectives from those *doing* democratic labor, on the ground, in the majority world. The project comprised an online survey in 2021, five in-person workshops in June 2021, and 12 online focus groups in April and May 2022. The survey mapped deliberative practices, barriers, and adaptations using Participedia's data model, a wide-ranging questionnaire documenting 42 variables on context, design, and impact of participatory initiatives (Gastil et al., 2017; Participedia, 2019). A supplementary section with multiple-choice and open text fields invited respondents to identify barriers and adaptations in their work across seven areas: political, participatory, cultural, social capital, organizational, contextual, and informational. In addition, two published volumes document narrative accounts of their practices (Extituto, 2023, 2024).

Respondents were global practitioners—organizations or individuals—of participatory and deliberative democracy from four regional hubs: Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia and India, and Eastern Europe. They were identified through volunteer sampling via open calls and snowball sampling via the project's Advisory Committee, composed of five international democracy organizations (Democracia en Red, Participedia, People Powered, Democratic Society, and i4policy) that facilitated access to practitioner networks and ensured diversity in regional coverage. Given the absence of a sampling frame or known

population of Global South deliberative practitioners, Demo.Reset did not aspire to identify a representative sample. Instead, it sought to advance an initial mapping of global practitioners and practices of deliberation, attending to regional diversity. Figure 1 illustrates the origin and distribution of the 108 respondents who participated in the survey, with 40% coming from Latin America, 48.2% from Sub-Saharan Africa, 10% from India and Southeast Asia, and 2.8% from Eastern Europe.

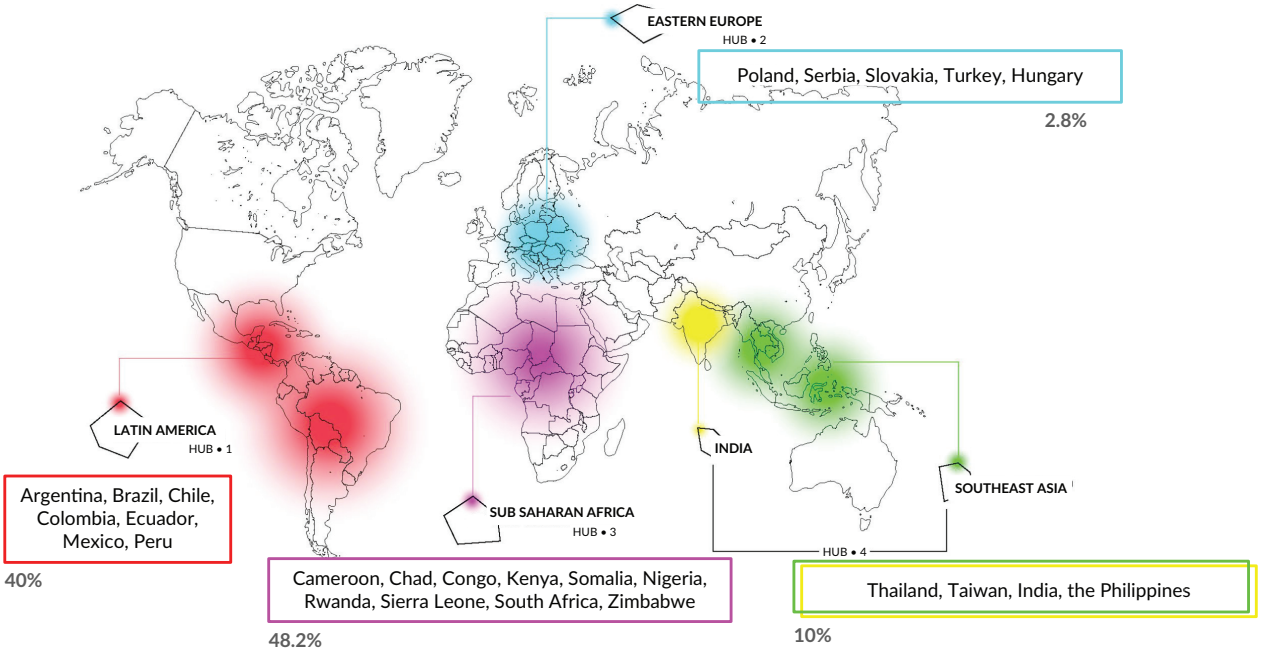

Figure 1. Geographic distribution of Demo.Reset respondents by regional hub. Note: *N* = 108 respondents. Source: Demo.Reset (2022).

This article engages narrative accounts (Extituto, 2023, 2024) and survey responses by 105 organizations active in 22 countries in the first three hubs. Three respondents active in five Eastern European countries are excluded from the analysis: these countries are not part of the Global South, and represent a minimal segment of responses that does not substantially affect the analysis.

3.2. Category-Building

To bring practitioner narratives in dialogue with democratic theory, I follow the ethos of democratic theorizing and the principles of grounded normative theory. In line with *epistemological inclusion*, this study focuses on deliberation not as a normative concept but as a practice, developing explanations that "center on marginalized lived experiences" (Asenbaum et al., 2023, p. 3) and foreground the experiences of those who are "on the frontline of struggles" (Johnson, 2022, p. 62). Acknowledging that "activists produce normative theory in their own political debates and through their prefigurative politics" (Asenbaum et al., 2023, p. 5), the analysis below is presented in dialogue with the accounts of respondents and project leads. The principle of *comprehensiveness* demands systematic data gathering to map out the variety of interests, claims, and stakeholders involved in the issue (Ackerly et al., 2024, pp. 4–5). To achieve this, I reviewed open text survey responses (Demo.Reset, 2022) and compared them with narrative accounts from respondents (see Extituto, 2023, 2024).

In line with the principle of *recursivity* (Ackerly et al., 2024, p. 5), I engaged iteratively with the evidence, identifying recurring argument patterns and categories to refine my own analytical claims. The categories that structure findings result from the reconstruction of argumentation patterns and overarching themes. Two strategies were deployed: deductive thematic analysis organized narratives following variables from the data model, identifying types and purposes of deliberation, and locating relevant excerpts for analysis (Bingham, 2023, pp. 2–4); and inductive analysis was used to typify descriptions of respondents' practices, barriers, and adaptations, to ensure alignment between my theoretical reconstruction and respondents' own accounts (Saldaña, 2021, pp. 61–62). Direct citations of respondents' narratives illustrate the development of categories and explanations. I prioritized published narratives (Extituto, 2023, 2024) over unpublished responses (Demo.Reset, 2022) to allow for a plausible and accountable reconstruction of this article's account and arguments. Translations from Spanish are my own.

Finally, *epistemic accountability* mandates recognizing power structures in knowledge production and avoiding the misrepresentation of respondents' perspectives. Following the commendation to share findings "with those engaged" and "dialogue with them on possible differences of interpretation" (Ackerly et al., 2024, p. 12), iterations of analytical claims were discussed in two dedicated sessions, allowing for feedback and further reflection: first in November 2023 in Bogotá, Colombia, with project leads, local practitioners, and participants; then in June 2024, online, with global respondents and the general public. In June 2025, former and current Demo.Reset leads reviewed and endorsed this article for publication.

4. Situating Deliberation: Visions and Practices from the Field

What is the democratic function of deliberation in the Global South? Practitioner narratives of deliberation, its forms, goals, and uses are brought into dialogue with the three democratic functions in Warren's problem-based approach—empowered inclusions, collective agenda formation, and decision-making. While the literature review in Section 2 presented models and functions "content down," I now approach the question "context up," reconstructing respondents' narratives to locate "normatively relevant claims" (Ackerly et al., 2024, p. 21) and "broaden the empirical basis" that informs definitions of the functions of deliberation. Each subsection (a) discusses democratic functions in liberal, deliberative, and problem-based approaches, (b) reconstructs respondent accounts of deliberative practice in the Global South, drawing on quotes and examples, and (c) collates those narratives into broader categories that explain the functions of deliberation in context.

I find that Warren's functions (2017) more accurately explain how Global South practitioners deploy deliberation than liberal and deliberative model-based theories. Yet I also find differential, situated accounts of those functions. Despite variation in context and practices, practitioners generally combine deliberation with other forms of participation and deploy it strategically to pursue goals that go beyond the moment of reasoned dialogue: *fostering pluralism*, *building coalitions*, and *enabling collective action*. This demonstrates that, beyond Warren's original assessment that deliberation is best suited to pursue collective will or agenda-formation (Warren, 2017, p. 39), all three functions can be associated with deliberative practice, as shown in the three subsections below.

4.1. Empower Inclusions: Fostering Pluralism

In liberal and deliberative models, equality is both the departure and arrival point for political participation. Liberal democracy requires the acknowledgement of "free and equal individuals" (Held, 2006, p. 59) who reconcile their different interests "in the ballot box" (Held, 2006, p. 72). Public deliberation in liberal models is merely intermediary, so that "public views can be refined and enlarged when passed through the medium of a chosen body of citizens" (Held, 2006, p. 73). In deliberative theory, equality requires more than individual one-off acts of participation; it demands equal access to the public sphere and equal conditions for meaningful engagement (e.g., Beauvais & Bächtiger, 2016, p. 1). Here, deliberation entails a double mandate: first, to ensure the "inclusion of all those affected by decisions;" second, to ensure the "inclusion of all relevant positions on the issue at hand" (Elstub, 2018, p. 191).

Such equality in political participation faces barriers everywhere, but those barriers are exacerbated in less privileged contexts. In the Global South, "the political equality necessary for effective inclusion cannot be considered as a given, since different forms of social, economic, cultural, educational or ethnic inequalities translate into politics" (Raventós, 2008, p. 14). Under constrained opportunities for meaningful political engagement, different subaltern groups have historically had to "take a step back" and develop their own "different forms of popular participation" (Raventós, 2008, p. 14).

Narratives from Demo.Reset echoes the difficulties in creating equality in access to political participation. Respondents therefore report designing deliberation not for the general population of "free and equal" individuals, but targeting specific groups: those that have historically suffered social, cultural, and economic deprivation and been excluded from political participation. They can be structurally marginalized groups (such as identity-based or interest groups), but also other stakeholders that have been sidelined in institutional politics in their respective contexts (such as organized civil society). Which groups are targeted varies across regions. Latin American practitioners prioritize gender-based agendas, especially in relation to women's political participation and mobilization around their demands for rights. In Eastern Asia, deliberative practices center on civil rights, including religious rights, and strengthening civic and political engagement. Sub-Saharan African practitioners instead prioritize low-income groups, youth, women, and rural residents.

Deployed in this way, deliberation brings members of structurally disadvantaged groups together to talk to and among each other, find common ground, and develop strategies to improve their own political engagement. In Taiwan, for instance, participatory budgeting assemblies were complemented with thematic project-based deliberations, such as "entertainment activities for migrant workers, or disability welfare services" (Extituto, 2024, p. 85). Without these targeted projects, those groups would be unlikely to participate. Another illustrative example is feminist student assemblies in Colombia. In the aftermath of #NiUnaMenos and #MeToo, female students began organizing open assemblies to tackle growing harassment, abuse, and discrimination at universities. These assemblies were "an exclusive space for women and non-binary persons," not allowing "any male participation, or even attendance, in order to provide a safe space for women to talk about their experiences" (Extituto, 2023, p. 198). Participants could exchange individual or anonymized stories that helped identify offenders, abusive practices, and institutional gaps. Some of these assemblies produced lists of demands aimed at University leadership, while others remained an "alternative space for participation for groups that are underrepresented in other political spaces or traditionally monopolized by men, like student committees and university institutional bodies" (Extituto, 2023, p. 200).

Normative theoretical models can neglect the inclusive function of these deliberative practices. In liberal models, power is understood as "non-hierarchically and competitively arranged…part of an 'endless process of bargaining' between numerous groups representing different interests" (Held, 2006, p. 160). Liberal democracies emphasize institutional guarantees so that different groups can organize and compete for political representation (Held, 2006, pp. 77–78); across the Global South, the guarantees that enable the bargaining among groups are often not given. Some groups face extraordinary constraints to participate due to their income, education, gender, nationality, ethnicity, or cultural norms (Extituto, 2023, pp. 113–115).

In turn, deliberative models emphasize equality of access—deliberative practices should enable the inclusion "of all those affected by decisions" and "of all relevant positions on the issue at hand" (Elstub, 2018, p. 191). To ensure that double inclusion, Global North deliberations often seek to bring historically marginalized groups into forums with the majoritarian population, for instance by over-sampling them during recruitment, supporting their accessibility needs, providing diverse learning materials, and protecting their time and space through facilitated deliberation (Dell'Aquila et al., 2024, pp. 19–31). But Global South deliberations do not necessarily seek integration into public discourse, nor do they foreground the interaction between historically marginalized groups and the broader public or institutional spaces. Instead, they aim to support certain—not all—groups by creating safe spaces in often hostile contexts. In this sense, respondents' narratives align with the aims of enclave deliberation (Himmelroos et al., 2017) rather than public forums, open or invited.

In Warren's problem-based approach, deliberation is not expected to empower inclusions: "deliberation is not, in itself, a mode of empowerment, nor is it a mechanism for distributing empowerments" (2017, p. 48), except as a means of recognition that can "endow *others* with the status of discursive participants" (Warren, 2017, p. 48, emphasis added). Narratives from Global South practice challenge this account: student assemblies in Colombia supported both inclusion and empowerment of female students, improving their standing within their institutional settings; similarly, Taiwan's thematic budgeting deliberations successfully engaged migrant workers and people with disabilities, groups that would otherwise not have been reached. In these narratives, organizers and participants claim and perform that recognition for themselves.

Deliberation in the Global South thus enacts inclusion by fostering pluralism, "empowering marginalized groups to practise narrative agency—to give an account of oneself using one's own voice, on one's own terms" (Curato et al., 2019, p. 65). Deliberative spaces encourage equal and reasoned dialogue *for* and *among* historically excluded groups, strengthening their social and political standing in contexts where other channels for political participation are insufficient or where institutional arrangements systematically exclude those groups. It is used to mitigate exclusions in the public and political sphere, focusing on "representation, redistribution and recognition of the needs of those who make up a diverse community" (Extituto, 2023, p. 193).

4.2. Agenda Formation: Building Coalitions

In liberal democracies, collective agendas are determined by "free and fair elections in which every citizen's vote has an equal weight;" the aggregation of individual wills through suffrage is meant to ensure "accountable and feasible government" (Held, 2006, p. 94) that reflects the public agenda. Yet, over time, party governments have been increasingly considered "rubber-stampers," susceptible to powerful sectoral

interests that informally set agendas and vetoes (c.f. Palumbo, 2023, p. 4). Deliberative models instead underscore collective agenda-setting via public reasoning. Where liberal democracies are structured around the aggregation of individual will-expression, deliberation is talk-centric and requires the "considered reflection" of ideas (Chambers, 2009, p. 335). All other things equal, the exchange of arguments distinguishes deliberation from other forms of political participation in democratic theory because participants engage with each other in reflective debate with mutual respect. Deliberation "is not about speaking up but also about hearing the other side," "listening across difference" to understand the positions of "differently situated others" (Young, 1996, p. 128). For Jane Mansbridge, it must entail "weighing and reflecting…with care and thoughtful consideration"; participants must consider each other "as equals engaged in the mutual exchange of reasons oriented as if to reaching a shared practical judgment" (Mansbridge, 2015, pp. 28–29).

In the Global South, however, structural, political, and institutional challenges systematically prevent individuals and groups from meaningfully influencing public agendas. Elections may be rigged or representatives unresponsive to their constituencies; public arenas may be inaccessible to certain groups; governments may offer one-sided opportunities, such as public meetings where participants are not allowed to speak, or inconsequential forms of engagement, where citizen input is later ignored. Additional barriers include contextual (e.g., climate catastrophes), material (e.g., lack of infrastructure), and systemic issues (e.g., elite capture or bureaucratization; Extituto, 2024, pp. 32–35).

In this context, Demo.Reset respondents see deliberation as a vehicle for coalition-building: it creates spaces for interested groups to come together, build common understandings, and forge alliances around proposals. Different groups need to work together to gather support for political transformations—as a respondent explained, "deliberation is the only way to understand better the problems and solutions that affect us all, even if they are often differentiated" (Extituto, 2024, p. 119). This is seen as a necessary precondition to influence the public agenda, especially when access to political and institutional arenas is limited or barred. Figure 2 below shows reported purposes of deliberative practices: forums are convened with the main goal of understanding problems in 14% to 20% of mapped practices across hubs, and developing capacities in 30% to 35% across hubs. For example, in some African countries, democratic institutions operate under limited statehood. Elections may be called off or their results may lack transparency, legitimacy, or integrity (Extituto, 2024, pp. 72–73). When the institutional interlocutors for policy demands are missing, communities turn to other strategies to advance their goals. Latin American practitioners, for instance,

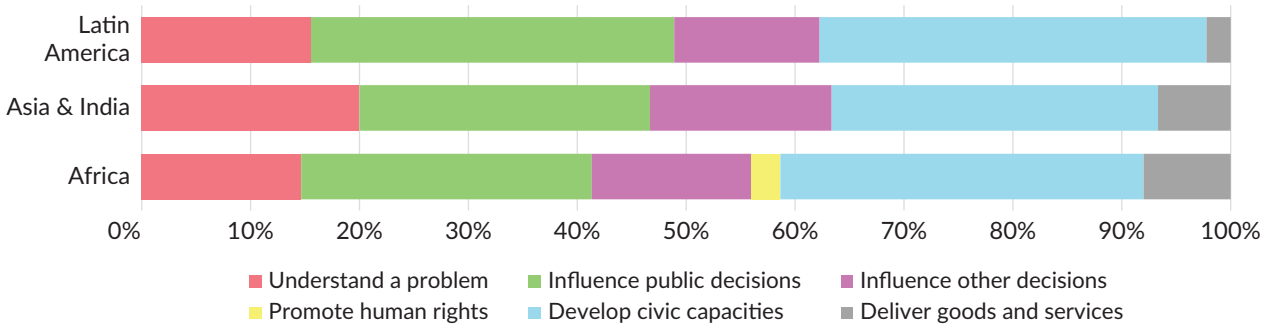

Figure 2. Purposes of deliberative practices by regional hub. Note: *n* = 127 practices. Source: Demo.Reset (2022).

collaborate with other democracy organizations to carry out a citizens' assembly to advance a "community of practice" beyond the single exercise of the assembly (Extituto, 2024, pp. 113, 141). Initiatives in Sub-Saharan Africa, in turn, often pair different stakeholders to work together on community development initiatives to improve their chances of success (Extituto, 2024, p. 47).

The most frequent deliberative formats are therefore invited spaces, such as thematic forums and community-based dialogue. The goal of invited forums is to mitigate these groups' political and social capital asymmetries and ensure more equitable opportunities for participation. As one respondent explained, the focus lies on "generating community strengthening" and "developing tools and languages that increase people's abilities to participate in public power" (Extituto, 2024, p. 150).

To support those groups and channel social and political coalitions, deliberative spaces often adopt capacity-building approaches, like human rights education and awareness campaigns, but also civic education. An illustrative example is Ashanti's Political Training School for Afro-Peruvian Youth. The project brings together young black people to deliberative forums where they access information and training materials on political participation and Afro-Peruvian history (Extituto, 2023, p. 217). However, the main goal of the space is not unidirectional information, but rather creating "dialogue and conversation, a space for fellowship where participants share their experiences and knowledge about Afro-descendant identity" (Extituto, 2023, p. 218). As a historically oppressed and underrepresented population, the School allows them to "collectively participate more actively" and "communicate their demands" in both public and institutional settings (Extituto, 2023, p. 219).

In Mark Warren's approach, supporting collective agenda- and will-formation is deliberation's key strength. Through reasoned dialogue, "epistemic goods" and "common and overlapping preferences can emerge" (2017, 48). Deliberation allows "individual preferences…to be related communicatively to collective judgements," ensuring that all participants have an equal chance at voice, curtailing groupthink and domination by certain individuals, and grounding rhetoric on careful consideration of facts and arguments (Warren, 2017, p. 44). This description reflects narratives emerging from Demo.Reset, yet it misses part of the goal they pursue beyond mere agenda-setting. Ultimately, deliberation is employed to empower groups—especially those structurally disadvantaged or historically marginalized—to identify shared goals and develop coalitions that can potentially exert influence on the public arena.

4.3. Influence Decision-Making: Enabling Collective Action

To what extent the public can weigh in on political decisions matters greatly for a regime's democratic value. In liberal models, that power is "essentially dispersed throughout society, and since there is a plurality of pressure points, a variety of competing policy-formulating and decision-making centres arises," so that "political outcomes are the result of government…trying to mediate and adjudicate between the competing demands of groups" (Held, 2006, p. 161). Deliberative democrats point out that both political apathy and unequal capacity to reach institutions hinder plural decision-making, making electoral-representative mechanisms elitist and exclusionary (Palumbo, 2023, p. 5). They instead underscore the reasoned exchange of arguments as a way to generate both more inclusive and effective decisions, because it allows participants to "communicatively form personal preferences into *collective opinions* and wills, and to implement those collective wills as democratic *collective decisions*" (Beauvais, 2018, p. 146, emphasis added).

Yet across the Global South, even when opportunities to influence decision-making arise, citizens and organizations may face higher barriers than other actors to exert that influence. With little variation, respondents report that existing institutional channels for consultation and policy influence in their countries often fall short of meaningful engagement or perpetuate the exclusion of certain groups and voices. For example, Sub-Saharan African organizations described how mothers with small children often cannot join public forums owing to their care duties, while adult men show interest in participating when they expect these forums to bring potential job offers (Extituto, 2024, p. 33). Others in the region report ethnic and religious discrimination as a cultural barrier for affected groups' willingness to participate in public consultations (Extituto, 2024, p. 57). Additional material barriers to participation include a lack of infrastructure, resources, and other external conditions, such as limitations to the right to meet in public or communities' physical or political isolation. In Southeast Asia, for instance, human rights violations and violent conflict often bar communities from engaging in political activities (Extituto, 2024, p. 81). Latin American organizations, in turn, report financial constraints in high poverty contexts as the most significant material barrier, along with difficulties for public messaging to reach potentially affected groups (Extituto, 2024, pp. 97–98).

Due to these limitations, deliberative practitioners in the Global South must strategize when they seek political impact. Conditions for influence over decision-making are not given, so they must first be created. Deliberation offers a means for participants and practitioners to collectively assess opportunities, map political fields, and mobilize for their interests. Rather than opening direct channels to policy and politics, deliberation enables *collective action*. An example is Estamos Listas, a Colombian political movement of "Black, Indigenous, lesbian, transgender, bisexual, and cisgender women" (Extituto, 2023, p. 202) formed through word-of-mouth and direct invitation, explicitly aiming to ensure diversity and center women's voices in politics. The movement leveraged a Feminist Café system, comprising "regional circles where topics affecting the national movement were defined," shaping their political demands and defining core issues for their public and political campaigns, including what independent candidacies to back in local elections (Extituto, 2023, p. 204).

In contexts where authorities may not be supportive or even open to citizens "deciding on the policies that will affect their lives" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2), social mobilization remains a necessary form of engagement. In the Global North, deliberative processes are often geared towards producing outputs, influencing decision-making by way of policy recommendations (c.f. Curato et al., 2017). In the Global South, limited state capacity and even open hostility towards participation lead respondents to use deliberation to mobilize public influence instead. For instance, in Africa, ActHub incorporates deliberative and dialogic moments within other processes, such as citizen budgeting, fiscal data, or advocacy campaigns, to create space for strategizing. Deliberation strengthens capacity for action insofar as it fosters "people's capacity to hold the government accountable in environmental [issues], governance, spending" (Extituto, 2024, p. 49). In Central Asia, the Sardovaya movement used village assemblies in rural settings to mobilize landless workers and "untouchables" and successfully articulate their claims for land (Extituto, 2024, p. 88). Respondents thus see the need to first support communities in creating connections and alliances that can enable them to strategically intervene in the public sphere. Or, as one respondent put it, in order to effect change, deliberation must channel:

> An imminent need for creating new democratic and communal spaces where various actors can safely cooperate and work on educating and supporting their communities, empowering each other to

> create change and fight for democracy, and experiment with new forms of democracy-building. (Extituto, 2024, p. 130)

In Warren's account, deliberation is not necessarily expected to directly affect institutional decision-making, defined as "the capacity to make and impose binding decisions upon themselves," but rather as a "mode of influence" (Warren, 2017, pp. 44, 48) where participants attempt to persuade each other and, later, collectively attempt to persuade political decision-makers of their reasoned conclusions. Deliberative influence is temporally serial, while (political) decisions often happen in fast timelines. This resonates with respondents' stories; however, the sequentiality of deliberative influence over public agendas and political decision-making is precisely the reason why practitioners choose deliberation. It reflects a pragmatic acknowledgement that influencing political decisions requires both a deep understanding of issues and broad-based support. To create these conditions, rather than relying solely on deliberative forums, respondents often employ a mix of informal engagement strategies and other collaborative approaches, bringing stakeholders to work together through deliberation, community organizing, protesting, and informal participation through, e.g., community action. Combining multiple engagement and mobilization methods helps respondents overcome barriers to participation and enhances their capacity to influence policies and politics by enacting participation across multiple fronts.

5. Conclusion

This article has advanced a situated account of a diverse range of deliberative practices in the Global South and their democratic functions from the perspective of those *doing* deliberation as documented by Demo.Reset. Demo.Reset asked 108 deliberative practitioners active in 26 countries to map their practices, discuss barriers and constraints, and identify trends and shared strategies. I examined 105 of those responses and narrative accounts, which give privileged insight into how deliberation takes place across global regions and what aims it pursues in contexts where political participation is difficult or entirely barred. Following the principles of grounded normative theory (Ackerly et al., 2024) and democratic theorizing (Asenbaum, 2022; Asenbaum et al., 2023), I brought their insights into dialogue with liberal and deliberative models, and with Mark Warren's problem-based approach. Delving into practitioner narratives uncovered a nuanced picture of how deliberation is conceptualized, implemented, and integrated in their political practice. Acknowledging there is variation across contexts and locations, their accounts portray a distinct landscape of deliberation within and across Global South regions. The iterative reading of theoretical categories from the perspective of Global South deliberative practices allows rethinking and contextualizing what deliberation can do: it empowers inclusions by fostering pluralism; enables collective agenda setting through coalition building; and influences decision-making via collective action. This reading seeks to contribute to ongoing efforts to pluralize democratic theory and to "the study of deliberative democracy…as a normative project informed by empirical findings" (Sass & Dryzek, 2014, p. 20). There are at least three relevant implications from these findings.

First, the developed categories are meant to expand the range of critical inputs for theory development, "informing normative arguments through original empirical research or analysis" (Ackerly et al., 2024, p. 8). Theoretical models of liberal and deliberative democracy have limited capacity to explain the democratic function of deliberation in the Global South. While model-based theories are valuable tools for reflection and empirical research, they evidence a Global North bias that has largely neglected Global South histories,

visions, and practices. In turn, although Warren's functions better explain how and why deliberation is deployed by Global South practitioners, respondents' narratives also challenge some theoretical assumptions and help contextualize and reformulate analytical categories to explain the democratic function of deliberation.

Bringing existing theory in dialogue with Global South practice does not seek to generate a new set of "universal" explanations about deliberative democracy, but situated accounts of what deliberation can look like, why it is deployed, and what it seeks to achieve. Where established scholarship on models and functions of deliberation has drawn mainly on theory produced in the Global North, this article invites us to bring established understandings of deliberative democracy into dialogue with the experience of those doing deliberation, on the ground, across different contexts. The resulting categories and explanations may be explored and refined in future studies, and invite timely reflections: What democratic norms underlie deliberative practices that seek to foster pluralism, build coalitions, and foster collective action? What inclusions and exclusions do those norms justify in those contexts, and to what extent can they "travel"? What are the implications for process design if deliberative forums shift from, e.g., emphasizing collective agenda-setting (as DMPs do) to centering coalition-building?

Second, engagement with practitioner narratives and documented deliberative practices from the Global South has shown that deliberation is used strategically and not constrained to predefined institutional or process designs. It is not a standalone practice, nor necessarily the predilect one, but rather one tool among many in much wider participatory repertoires. Respondents are clear on this. Across hubs, they report that commonly used dialogue-based methodologies, such as community meetings, workshops, or public hearings, rarely lead to immediate political outcomes. Neither do more sophisticated methodologies, such as sortition-based citizens' assemblies, which are also financially and functionally costly. Respondents do not align with fixed approaches to institutional design, adopting and adapting solutions to need and context.

Global South practitioners instead adopt a *hybridization* approach towards deliberation, tweaking and sequencing deliberative methods to adapt to emergent needs and available resources. They recognize that single institutions or processes alone cannot address their communities' structural political issues through political engagement, especially under conditions of stark socio-economic inequalities, colonial legacies, insecurity, or violence. Such fundamental barriers prevent not only meaningful political participation but also access to basic rights. Deliberation, alone, does not open a road to political transformation, although it often does align with respondents' transformative political projects.

Third, variation across contexts and practices demands caution in describing and presenting deliberative practices in the Global South—these are not necessarily equivalent nor automatically of higher normative value. Deliberative forums may still be deployed in undemocratic ways or for undemocratic ends. For example, in Kenya, public hearings where the local chief would inform citizens about government policy have been historically mandatory to attend. Such practice "would hardly be called deliberation, as it was a monologue directed to the citizens in which they were told about what the government wanted and how quickly it wanted it" (Extituto, 2024, p. 65). Research by Baogang He and Hendrik Wagenaar has shown how deliberation in authoritarian regimes, as in China, is "used by the party in power to manage social conflict and promote regime stability" (as cited in Curato et al., 2024, p. 59). Brazil, in turn, "may be among the most deliberative of democracies, but this provided little resistance to the state's lurch towards authoritarianism"

during the Bolsonaro government (Curato et al., 2020, p. 62); instead, deliberation could be found in other innovative formats challenging state institutions, such as collective mandates (Pogrebinschi & Ross, 2019, p. 391). Researchers and practitioners must be systematic in accounting for context, practice, and outcomes—not all deliberation may align with the normative principles and political project of deliberative democracy. Moreover, Demo.Reset surveyed only practitioner-led processes; responses are illustrative and do not aim to represent the entirety of Global South deliberation. Further research is needed for a more systematic and comprehensive documentation of Global South processes, accounts, and categories.

Centering visions and practices of deliberation in the Global South remains crucial. It allows us to identify innovative and context-specific approaches, expanding our knowledge of what deliberation can be and inviting reflection as to what it should be. It challenges the dominance of Global North perspectives in the field, promoting a more accurate understanding of deliberative democracy as it effectively takes place on the ground. It inspires new theoretical and practical developments, fostering a more dynamic and responsive community of inquiry and practice. As Demo.Reset project leads concluded, "recognizing the processes of the Global South is not simply a matter of allowing us to listen to their voices and give them visibility," it is also "an invitation to expand the limits of what we know as deliberative democracy" (Extituto, 2024, p. 148).

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Claude 4.0 Sonnet was used to format references.

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