INNOVATIVE DESIGN, UNFORESEEN VULNERABILITIES: DESIGN-INDUCED CHALLENGES IN THE GLOBAL ASSEMBLY

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Abstract

Citizens' assemblies are gaining prominence in global policymaking as platforms for enhancing citizen engagement, but their complex designs risk exacerbating political inequalities. This paper examines the inaugural Global Assembly, highlighting how its design and demands unintentionally fostered participatory vulnerabilities. Adopting a feminist perspective, we explore the experiences of assembly members who faced disproportionate challenges but also demonstrated resilient improvisations in response. Employing grounded normative and constructivist theories and in-depth interviews as methodologies, we identified environmental factors, personal circumstances, and resource access as key determinants of design-induced participatory vulnerabilities. Recommendations for future transnational and digital assemblies are presented, considering the disadvantages and adaptive practices developed by the assembly members to resiliently persist in their participatory journey.

Purpose: Article developing a key aspect of my ongoing PhD dissertation.

Keywords: Deliberative Democracy, Democratic Innovations, Citizen Assemblies, Vulnerabilities; Grounded Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Citizens' assemblies have gained global attention in the last decade as platforms for citizen deliberation on important issues, aiming for more inclusive and representative decision-making through sophisticated designs like random selection and extensive phases of learning and decision-making (OECD, 2020; Dryzek et al., 2020; Curato and Farrel, 2021; Landemore & Fourniau, 2022; Reuchamps et al., 2023). Despite these intentions, challenges in ensuring equal participation have been noted. Research shows that marginalized groups often have less participation or recognition in these assemblies, thus perpetuating existing inequalities (Gerber et al., 2019; Beauvais, 2020). Building on similar findings, Kevin Elliot (2023) introduces the concept of the "paradox of empowerment". He argues that as democratic innovations, such as citizens' assemblies, become more complex and demanding, they unintentionally exacerbate the political marginalization of already disadvantaged citizens.

This paper delves into the "paradox of empowerment" hypothesis within the first Global Citizen Assembly on Climate Change and Ecological Crisis (GA), exploring how political disadvantages and unintended harms can manifest in the lives of assembly members as

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unanticipated outcomes of design choices and the demands of a successful and inspiring democratic innovation. However, drawing from feminist concepts of vulnerability (Brown, 2011; Gilson, 2014; Cole, 2016; Butler, 2016, 2021; Veloso, 2023), we recognize that individuals facing vulnerabilities are not passive victims. Amid challenging circumstances, they can employ creative adaptations and resilience to consistently exercise their political autonomy. In summary, this ambivalent perspective on vulnerability allowed us to examine factors that introduced participatory challenges and resiliencies during and beyond deliberative sessions.

To address biases and potential harms in representing vulnerabilities experienced by others, we employed a comprehensive methodology. Utilizing grounded normative and constructivist methods, we conducted in-depth interviews to thoroughly explore the participatory experiences and perspectives of GA members. Our investigation extended beyond their deliberative interactions, shedding light on the effects of the design choices and demands of the Global Assembly on their daily lives while considering their own voices and concepts. This approach enabled us to abductively identify three primary sources of participatory vulnerabilities that interacted with GA design and demands: living environments, individual and bodily circumstances, and access to networks of participatory resources. Considering the experiences of vulnerability and resilience resulting from those sources, we presented grounded recommendations for future assemblies, emphasizing the need to adapt to the unique needs of participants, shift away from an individualistic approach to engagement, and promote capacity building to reduce dependence on democratic innovation intermediaries.

1 CITIZEN ASSEMBLIES AS COMPLEX DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS

In a global democratic crisis marked by authoritarian shifts in countries like Russia and Turkey and the rise of hybrid regimes, the erosion of democratic principles and the need for political equality and active citizen participation have become starkly apparent (Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Bermeo, 2016; Mounk, 2018; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2020). Citizens' assemblies have emerged as innovative solutions, using diverse participatory methods to form representative bodies for urgent deliberations, thereby enhancing the quality and legitimacy of democratic decisions (OECD, 2020; Dryzek et al., 2020; Curato and Farrel, 2021; Landemore & Fourniau, 2022; Reuchamps et al., 2023). These assemblies, viewed as "defibrillators" of democracy, rejuvenate political systems by boosting citizen engagement, trust, and solidarity, and by catalyzing ambitious policy development and citizen mobilization (Wilson & Mellier, 2021).

Although some researchers characterize citizens' assemblies by standard mini-public features or “core principles” (e.g., Vrydagh, 2023) in practice, these democratic innovations

are distinguished by their greater scale and complexity of design, reflecting their mission to emulate a microcosm of society itself (Gerwin, 2018, p.17). Unlike smaller DMPs like citizen juries or councils, Citizens' Assemblies typically muster around 90 participants, a number significantly surpassing the modest 15-30 participants commonly found in their smaller counterparts (OECD, 2020).

For instance, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was notable for its significant scale, bringing together 160 citizens. Its thorough selection process aimed to mirror the demographic representation of the province's population. This began with an update of the voters list, followed by selecting citizens to represent the province's 79 electoral districts demographically. To address early criticisms about aboriginal representation, one male and one female aboriginal citizen were randomly added (Warren and Pearse, 2008, p.10). Similarly, the French Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (CCC) used meticulous selection through quota sampling from an initial pool of 300,000 randomly generated phone numbers, considering criteria like age, gender, education level, geographic origin, settlement type, and job type. This process ultimately selected 190 participants, with 104 attending all sessions (Giraudet et al., 2021, p.5). On the other hand, the Irish Constitutional Convention showcased the complexity of selection in a mixed assembly of 66 randomly selected Irish citizens and 33 politicians. Citizen members were chosen by an independent market research company to reflect the population's demographics, while the selection methods for politicians varied by political party, including voluntary selection and party whip decisions (Suiter et al., 2016, p.34).

Another core objective of Citizen Assemblies is to “produce highly informed judgments on problematic issues” (Dahl, 1989, p.340). The OECD report (2020) highlights that Citizen Assemblies typically extend over about 47 weeks, involving almost 19 cumulative days of learning and deliberation. This duration is considerably longer than the 2-5 weeks and days allocated in other Deliberative Mini-Public (DMP) formats, underscoring the depth and intensity of engagement in Citizen Assemblies.

The British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, operational from January to November 2004, serves as a notable example of a comprehensive and demanding citizen assembly. It unfolded in three distinct phases: an initial six-weekend learning period where members studied various electoral systems, followed by a public hearings phase that involved around 3,000 participants and incorporated 1,600 written submissions, crucial for the assembly's deliberative process. The final phase was dedicated to synthesizing this knowledge to recommend an electoral reform (Warren and Pearse, 2008). In contrast, the Irish Constitutional Convention, extending over a year, tasked its participants with addressing a broad range of constitutional topics, from voting age to same-sex marriage. This diversity required participants to gain a wide understanding across different areas, necessitating adaptability and the support of a steering group and an Academic and Legal Support Group

to guide discussions and manage information (Suiter et al., 2016, pp. 41-45). Similarly, the French Citizens' Convention on Climate (CCC) embarked on a rigorous journey, beginning with an initial educational session on climate science, followed by several rounds of expert consultations, debates, and policy proposal developments. Participants engaged in comprehensive plenary and thematic discussions, with legal experts refining proposals between sessions. The final phase involved a thorough review and amendment process, culminating in remote voting on 150 measures (Giraudet et al., 2021, p.7).

2 COMPLEX DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS THROUGH THE LENS OF VULNERABILITY

Citizens' Assemblies are renowned for their excellent democratic and epistemic qualities, a testament to their intricate design. Their increasing adoption as permanent components of democratic systems, as seen in Belgium's 2019 initiative (Niessen, C., & Reuchamps, 2022), underscores their perceived effectiveness. However, it's important to acknowledge that their complexity has its own set of challenges. While typical theoretical critiques and empirical studies point out that the robust design of Citizens' Assemblies may not ensure perfect democratic representation (Lafont, 2023), garner widespread public support (Walsh and Elking, 2021), guarantee effective decision implementation (Wells et al., 2021), or achieve equitable inclusion and deliberation (Gerber et al., 2019), there is a more nuanced risk. As democratic innovations become increasingly complex and demanding, there is the potential to inadvertently intensify political disadvantages or even cause harm to the most vulnerable participants, both within and outside their deliberative processes.

The "paradox of empowerment," highlighted by Elliot (2023, p. 73), reveals a counterintuitive dynamic in democratic participation, where efforts to boost engagement among average citizens inadvertently favour those with pre-existing advantages. Rooted in feminist critiques, such as those by Young (2000), this concept suggests that complex and demanding democratic innovations add extra layers of political action costs for individuals, extending beyond monetary aspects to include time, energy, and civic skills. More resource-intensive participation processes, like citizen assemblies, tend to further consolidate the influence of those already equipped to participate in politics, unintentionally marginalizing the very groups these innovations aim to empower. Elliot prompts us to acknowledge that even if citizen assemblies overcome financial and informational barriers, challenges related to unequal of time, attention, and other bodily resources persist, specially burdening “racial and ethnic minorities, women, poor people, migrants, and disabled people,” who are already deeply engaged in the daily struggle to secure their survival (Elliott, 2023, pp. 6-7).

In this paper, we delve into the paradox of empowerment hypothesis to scrutinize the design of the world's first Global Citizen Assembly on Climate Change and Ecological Crisis.

However, moving beyond Elliot (2023) argument, we posit that assembly members are not merely passive victims of participatory designs. Drawing from feminist literature, we argue that while certain social groups are disproportionately precarious and prone to harm, they are not passive victims[2] (Brown, 2011; Gilson, 2014; Veloso, 2022). Political theorists like Judith Butler (2016, 2021), examining the resistance of social movements and activists, prompt us to see human vulnerability as, beyond a risky openness to the world, that can be exploited as harm and violence, it's also a potential avenue for reinventing practices, forging new alliances, and experimenting with ways to challenge and subvert the material and symbolic structures that perpetuate subjugation[3]. Thus, the concept of vulnerability urges us not to essentialize the social conditions of certain groups, but to comprehend the factors contributing to their experiences of harm and injustice, and to recognize how they resist and assert their political autonomy.

Utilizing the ambivalent notion of vulnerability, which highlights how social conditions can enable political agency in difficult situations, our study examines the Global Assembly's design and its demanding participatory requirements in relation to the real experiences of its participants. This analysis revealed significant impacts on participants' lives, leading to participatory disadvantages, but also highlighted their creative responses to these challenges. Understanding this interplay is vital for developing a bottom-up approach that continuously evolves and decolonizes citizen assemblies. While these assemblies are a significant democratic innovation, their implementation shouldn't be uniform, especially based on standards from the Global North (Banerjee, 2022). They need careful adaptation to the diverse contexts and challenges of different communities, ensuring their relevance and effectiveness across varying environments.

In the next section, we will explore our methodology aimed at mitigating biases and potential harms in representing vulnerabilities, as highlighted by Cole (2016). For our case study on the Global Assembly, we employed in-depth interview methods combined with grounded normative and constructivist theory. This approach is tailored to highlight the experiences of participatory disadvantage and the adaptive strategies of assembly members,

[2] Adopting Gilson's (2014) concept of vulnerability as a state of being open to both affect and be affected offers a deeper understanding of the complexities of human nature. This approach recognizes the mix of challenges and opportunities in vulnerability, essential for evaluating how social structures affect individuals. Moreover, as Brown (2011) argues, acknowledging the agency and autonomy of the vulnerable is crucial to avoid paternalistic state policies, respecting the autonomy and voice of those often labeled as victims, and fostering empowerment over marginalization.

[3] Highlighting the dire conditions and unique social dynamics of immigrants at European borders, Judith Butler invites us to consider the role of vulnerability in political resistance. She notes, "When they do make the demand for papers, for movement, for entry, they are not precisely overcoming their vulnerability – they are demonstrating it." Butler suggests that this act of showing vulnerability is not about transforming it into strength, but rather using it as a bodily act crucial for advocating the necessary support for life. She emphasizes that resistance isn't synonymous with overcoming vulnerability. In the midst of hardship, spontaneous and improvised actions that display vulnerabilities, such as simple physical presence or a refusal to move, can be powerful tools to embody and articulate opposition to injustices and call for support (Butler, 2021, p.182-183).)

with a particular focus on their unique intersectionality of social conditions, of social, specific terms and concepts they use to describe their lived experiences.

3 CASE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Global Assembly participatory design

The inaugural Global Assembly (GA), spanning from October 7 to December 18, 2021, was a significant online event, bringing together participants from 100 locations worldwide, chosen through algorithmic sortition (Flanigan et al., 2021). This assembly focused on equitable and effective solutions to the climate and ecological crisis. Participants, who primarily communicated in English, committed to an intensive schedule. Over the course of 11 weeks, they engaged in weekly small, facilitated breakout sessions and larger plenary sessions on Zoom, dedicating a total of 68 hours. These sessions, which included extensive discussions and deliberations, culminated in the crafting of the “People’s Declaration for a Just and Sustainable Planet Earth” presented at COP26 in Glasgow (Global Assembly Team, 2022).

The Global Assembly's rigorous agenda and online structure, coupled with the choice of English as the primary language, posed distinct challenges for its members. Despite being designed to elevate voices often marginalized in global dialogues, the assembly faced logistical complexities. A significant portion of the participants (66%) lived on less than USD 10 a day, showcasing the economic diversity of the group. Linguistically, the assembly was remarkably diverse with 41 languages represented, and a notable 64% of participants needed English translation, reflecting the linguistic barriers encountered. The participant profile was inclusive, featuring indigenous individuals and refugees or displaced persons. Technological familiarity varied among members: while most were adept with mobile phones, a considerable number (36%) were inexperienced with computers and 34% were new to videoconferencing. Additionally, 75% of the participants were literate, indicating varied educational backgrounds.

To address the diverse needs of participants and offer case-by-case responses when necessary, the GA also developed a “decentralized community host model” (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p.171-172). The process relied on a network of organizations and collaborators who shared participants' languages and contexts, namely, Community Hosts. These organizations were responsible for addressing specific needs, keeping participants connected, and arranging essential resources such as internet access and translation. Also, by design, the GA adopted a universalizing principle of equal compensation (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p.243). Economic compensation was provided uniformly to contributors, partners, and participants worldwide. Assembly Members received a standardized allowance

of $600 for their participation, irrespective of their location or cost of living. Similarly, Community Hosts were compensated with a standard allowance of $2800 for their work.

Despite its intricate and hybrid design, the GA was not immune to intensify citizens vulnerabilities that led to asymmetric disadvantages in participation. The organizers acknowledged a "notable blind spot" in the performance of Community Hosts and identified internet connection as "the greatest barrier to Assembly Members' participation" (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p. 173). They attributed these challenges to insufficient resources for establishing a more robust network of collaborators. However, this perspective prompts further investigation: from the participants' viewpoint, were there additional constraints impacting their ability to participate in the Global Assembly beyond these identified issues?

3.2 Data generation and analysis: searching for the assembly members standpoint

The paper's main goal is to understand how the interaction between General Assembly (GA) design and assembly members' daily lives contributes to vulnerability experiences and potential harm or improvisation. To address ethical and methodological concerns of representing others vulnerabilities (Cole, 2016), we employed Grounded Normative Theory (GNT), which present methodological guidelines to generate critical and normative knowledge grounded in oppressed groups' lived experiences. Following Ackerly and colleagues' four core commitments (2021, p.5; 7-8), we conducted in-depth interviews with majority world assembly members. This choice was influenced by the likelihood that they encountered greater challenges in their participatory journey due to the extended duration of the process, technological demands, and the prevalence of the English language.

To ensure comprehensiveness and emphasize epistemological inclusion, we conducted 13 in-depth interviews with a diverse group of Assembly Members from various regions, including 4 from South America, 2 from South and Central Africa, 2 from Western Asia, 2 from Eastern Asia, 1 from Southeast Asia, and 2 from South Asia. While our initial focus was on geographic diversity, our group naturally encompassed individuals from diverse backgrounds, spanning age, gender, education, and socioeconomic status. This diverse representation allowed us to explore how different combinations of living conditions and social markers experienced distinct impacts from the General Assembly's design and demands.

Regarding recursivity and epistemic accountability, which highlight the need to be aware of potential power disparities inherent in the research process, we took specific measures. We obtained ethics committee approval and conducted interviews in participants' native languages, each session lasting approximately two hours. Our interview guide featured an open-ended set of forty questions, enabling participants to freely share their experiences during the General Assembly journey, without predefining what is vulnerability, harm or resistance to them. Consequently, the definition and significance of vulnerabilities within the

GA was something that emerged abductively during data analysis as we examined interviews for patterns and unique experiences, insights and concepts of the interviewees. More details on our data analysis will be provided in the next section.

3.3 Data analysis: critical and experiential grounded theory

In our study, we merged the methodologies of Grounded Normative Theory (GNT) with a critical and experiential Grounded Theory (GT) approach to employ a systematic analysis of our in-depth interviews. GT is a qualitative research method, focuses on constructing theories directly from qualitative data through abductive analysis and engagement with academic literature. It aims to abstractly conceptualize socio-political phenomena by scrutinizing their conditions, processes, and outcomes. To ensure a robust application of GT, we undertook a thorough process of data interpretation, coding, and conceptualization. This process was critical in developing categories that effectively organize and interpret various expressions of a social process, thereby giving meaningful insights into the data. (Strauss; Corbin, 2015, p.140; 187-188).

Initially, we adopted an experiential “line-by-line” coding method for each interview, aligning with Charmaz's guidance (2006, p.49). This method places a strong emphasis on interpret and categorize sensations, actions and processes that are narrated by the research subjects rather than to construct static topics to summarize an interview. This approach proved especially valuable in our quest to identify experiences of challenges, suffering, harm, improvisation, and resistance that occurred in the GA journey. Consistent with Morse et al. (2021, p.27-28), we meticulously assigned labels that closely resonated with respondents’ own language and concepts (in-vivo coding).

After a initial coding phase, we employed the constant comparative method to consolidate our interpretations and construct more abstract categories. Constant comparison is iterative approach that refines codes, integrates categories, and shapes emerging theories by continuously questioning and comparing raw data and interpretive categorization employed in different cases or observations; in our case, interviews (Strauss and Corbin, 2015, p.83-94). This method reduced our bias and enhanced the rigour of our interpretations and categories because we could contrast diverse participant experiences and the labels we created to summarize them, re-grouping as seem more fit and finding singularities and patters.

This thorough process led us to identify three primary sources of the core category of our GT research: participatory vulnerabilities. That core category encapsulates lived experiences in the GA journey that demonstrate challenges, harms, positive transformations and/or creative improvisations that our interviewees considered relevant to describe what they lived. We divided this core category in 3 sub-levels according to the most prevalence source of vulnerability experiences identified. As demonstrated in the board below, the sources of

vulnerability varied from interactions of GA design and demands with environment of participants, their personal and bodily circumstances and conditions of access to GA resources.

Participatory Vulnerabilities (Sources)	Description	Concrete Observations
Environmental Contextual	Participants' living environments, territories, or broader socio-political context.	Housing or urban infrastructure issues, situational disruptions like power outages or internet issues, and larger contextual influences such as political instability or climate-related challenges.
Personal and Bodily conditions	Daily routines and commitments, physical appearance, health and emotional states of the participants.	Aspects like age, gender, health status, physical ability, economic situation, and personal or professional commitments.
Accessibility to Information and Resources	Accessibility and effective usability of essential resources and information for participation.	Problems with the performance and resource provisions of organisers, community hosts, and translators.

Board 1: Categorization of experiences of vulnerabilities according to their main sources.

In the upcoming section, we will explore the three primary sources of participatory vulnerabilities in the Global Assembly (GA), as abductively inferred from our interviewees' experiences. Our focus extends beyond mere description to emphasize how variations in the intersection of social markers, such as gender, age, and occupation, differently affected assembly members' susceptibility to political harm and their resilience. This analytical approach is in line with intersectional and relational feminist critiques of deliberative democracy (e.g. Wojciechowska, 2019).

4 PARTICIPATORY VULNERABILITIES IN THE GLOBAL ASSEMBLY

4.1 Environmental and Contextual Conditions

The first category resulting from our grounded theory analysis encompassed experiences of vulnerability that primarily stemmed from an interplay between the demands of the Global Assembly's design and the concrete environment in which the participants connected to the Global Assembly. Among our 13 interviewees, three broad environmental factors held significant relevance: the COVID-19 pandemic, sociopolitical context, and, most frequently mentioned in our interviews, precarious housing conditions. Our analysis showed

that the consequences and ability to address these occurrences varied based on intersections of age, gender, and other social markers.

Covid-19

The Global Assembly took place against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to specific measures by the organizers (Global Assembly Team, 2022, pp. 71, 80). These measures included alternative participant recruitment methods and digital participation options with translators or community hosts while maintaining social distancing. However, our research uncovered unforeseen repercussions of COVID-19, particularly affecting elderly participants who relied on community hosts and translators for GA participation.

One Latin American participant in her sixties was unable to join regular sessions due to a potential COVID-19 infection. She depended on her community host for technological access and couldn't travel to the host's location because of her infection risk. Similarly, another elderly Latin American interviewee's participation was disrupted when her translator contracted COVID-19. She humorously noted the futility of attending alone: 'It was useless if it were just me going, right? She wouldn't understand me.' Missing the session not only affected her learning but also deprived her of emotional connection with other participants and the opportunity to be involved in important decision-making, leading to her frustration: 'it wasn't better because...I couldn't contact anyone...and if I went alone, it would be useless."

Sociopolitical context

A Central African resident faced heightened vulnerabilities due to the interaction between the design of the Global Assembly and the context of war and insecurity in their region. Similar to the South American interviewees mentioned earlier, this participant encountered a critical intersection of vulnerabilities related to the participatory requirements of the Global Assembly: technological and linguistic resources. However, the solution of relocating the participant from their home to the Community Host's location for access to technology and translation was not feasible due to "the ongoing history of war in our country, and, where I live there is an insecurity problem and most of the time we do not walk at night past a certain time."

Indeed, for this Assembly Member, the mitigation of vulnerability was only possible by providing digital connectivity equipment and resources in their own home. However, it was largely due to the resourcefulness and availability of the translator that this problem was effectively addressed. Since the Assembly Member's translator had access to a motorcycle, an arrangement was made for the translator to travel to the participant's residence to provide

translation services. The translator stayed overnight and returned the next morning to facilitate the Assembly Member's participation.

Precarious infrastructure

The most present contextual factors that modulated citizens vulnerabilities in challenges of participating in the Global Assembly participants were primarily linked to unaddressed precarious housing conditions, digital connectivity, and overall infrastructure of Assembly Members' locations.

Our analysis revealed that those who lived in the most precarious situations and, must probably, were among the most already political vulnerable GA participants, were the ones who most experienced disadvantages of participating in a digital democratic innovation. Among our 13 interviewees, eight confessed to grappling with internet connection issues during the Global Assembly, while five encountered disruptions due to power outages. These problems were most present among the interviewees who also had no familiarity with the English language or climate emergencies, further intensifying asymmetries of participation. As the earlier-referenced Central African participant underscored, issues with the internet and electricity "caused me not to follow up directly with the teachings and discussions during the evening deliberative sessions."

This kind of challenge was partially alleviated thanks to the improvised efforts of assembly members. A 58-year-old participant from Southeast Asia managed to acquire a power generator. A 37-year-old participant from Latin America, with fewer financial resources, would sometimes go to their neighbor's house to use their connection.

Nevertheless, the earlier mentioned improvisations, such as those by the Central African translator and the challenges of accessing energy and internet, prompt a critical inquiry: Is it fair to impose the additional burdens of a lengthy and intricate participatory journey, whether foreseen or unforeseen, on assembly members? This issue is further underscored by a 29-year-old interviewee from Eastern Asia, who questions whether the organizers should have done more to mitigate these environmental and structural challenges: "I think the organizers can help them to achieve equality."

4.2 Personal and embodied conditions of participation

Among our thirteen interviewees, at least five indicated that their Global Assembly participation impinged on their leisure time and activities. While these intrusions could potentially lead to long-term fatigue and diminished quality of life, the complaints were relatively minor. Additionally, more than a half of interviewees expressed anxiety about

attending the Assembly, often stemming from feelings of unpreparedness, inadequacy in meeting its demands, or a sense of economic and political disadvantage compared to others.

However, a more critical issue emerged from our analysis: the most substantial disruptions were those affecting participants' vital subsistence and reproductive activities. Females and those in economically challenging situations were particularly affected, highlighting a distinct vulnerability at the intersection of various social markers.

A senior interviewee from Latin America faced vulnerabilities that extended beyond mere scheduling conflicts. Deeply affected by financial hardship worsened by the pandemic, she described her existence as a 'struggle. Working to eat.' Her enthusiasm for learning about climate change in the Global Assembly was dampened by the significant disruption to her routine, as evening sessions clashed with her late-night work commitments in a restaurant kitchen and as a hairdresser, further straining her limited free time.

The senior Latin American participant in the Global Assembly had to juggle added responsibilities alongside a packed schedule. She managed to arrange temporary leave from her restaurant job for the Assembly sessions, convincing her employers of the economic benefits: 'I said that I would be participating and that I would have monetary gratification. Then they said, ‘Go, go.’ (...) And this gratification was very good for me, right, because I'm building, building a house gate...'. However, she still faced hurdles with technology, language, and the need to travel for participation, relying on mototaxi rides, a risky and unregulated transportation method in her city, thus heightening her physical and legal risks.

The senior participant from Latin America endured significant demands and sacrifices in participating in the Global Assembly. Her situation involved balancing 8-hour night shifts with Assembly sessions three to four nights weekly for three months, compounded by physical exhaustion, language, and technological challenges, and extra work as a hairdresser. While she described her experience positively as 'good' and 'not difficult,' it remains uncertain if this reflects a cultural tendency to avoid victimization or hesitation to voice complaints in a formal interview setting.

The interaction of the Global Assembly's design with gender and reproductive responsibilities placed a South Asian female participant in a challenging position. A 30-year-old with financial struggles and limited education, she relied on translation services to participate. Residing in a small home with her extended family, she had to relocate for Assembly sessions, necessitating travel to a location designated by her Community Host. Although the Assembly offered resources for rickshaw taxi services, this displacement need created complex consequences for her.

The limited nightly free time of the South Asian female participant was significantly encroached upon by the Global Assembly's requirements. She spent three to four nights each week in three-hour deliberative sessions and approximately more than an hour commuting, a

routine she termed a “quite time-consuming job.” This demanding schedule drastically reduced her preparation time, underscoring how her domestic duties greatly limited her learning and participation opportunities in the Assembly.:

> I used to read mostly in night-time, after I have made the food for and served to the family. In daytime, I did not find time as I have kids at home, I had to drop and pick them up from school. I had to help them in homework, feed my family two times a day, and after washing the dishes at night, then only I used to get some time to read the booklet. There is so much for me to do, day and night.

Her participation in the Assembly also brought gender-specific challenges. Her brother-in-law, sharing her household, questioned her husband about her routine, asking, 'why your wife travel so far, leaving her husband and kids alone at home and come back home so late at night, which is not good for a female.' Alongside the physical demands of domestic work, commuting, and Assembly participation, she faced sociopolitical and possibly psychological pressures due to traditional gender role expectations imposed by family members.

Participatory vulnerabilities in the Global Assembly, as we demonstrated, were influenced by a complex interaction of design factors and the participants personal characteristics. While resources like financial compensation and mobility assistance from the Assembly alleviated some issues, participants often relied on their own agency and improvisation. This included leveraging family resources and support networks for tasks like reviewing learning materials, transportation, and maintaining livelihoods during their busy schedules. For instance, the South Asian participant received help from her mother-in-law for childcare and emotional support from her husband amidst family pressure. In contrast, the senior participant from Latin America, without such family support, faced unmitigated physical and emotional stress throughout her participation.

4.3 Conditions of circulation and access of resources

The third set of vulnerabilities stemmed from the interaction between the GA's requirements and the design of networks involving devices and collaborators, notably community hosts and translators. These networks were essential in providing participants with vital access to information and other important resources.

Technology and language

Technological accessibility proved to be a significant challenge in this digital democratic innovation, with about half of our interviewees lacking either the necessary technology or the skills to effectively use digital devices and navigate online platforms for the Global Assembly. For instance, an elderly Southeast Asian respondent had to depend on their

spouse’s notebook and a backup generator provided by their son to counteract power outages. Despite owning a router, they faced intermittent connectivity issues and found it challenging to use the Zoom platform, leading to frequent disruptions in their participation. Reflecting on these experiences, the respondent shared, 'Our deliberation facilitator from Africa would always ask, "Where is the Assembly Member?" because I'm not good at using the computer, so we would sometimes have problems.'"

Regarding translation services, our interviewees generally expressed satisfaction with both the translators and the quality of translation provided. Their positive experiences often went beyond mere language translation, encompassing the technical and emotional support offered by translators, as well as the friendships that developed between participants and their translators. However, despite this positive feedback, some critical issues persisted, occasionally unnoticed by both the assembly members and the GA organizers.

Om the one hand, some of our interviewers received remote translation to participate in the GA. As noted by an Eastern Asian participant, "Maybe due to the internet connection, the translation was not fast enough sometimes, which made people wait for long and wasted people’s time." A more severe problem associated with remote translation was the fact that they impacted the quality of the content received.

Another significant problem was the inability of most interviewees, due to their lack of English proficiency, to accurately assess the quality of translation they received. Only two interviewees, who were somewhat proficient in English, could do so. For instance, an undergraduate student from East Asia, who joined the GA to learn about climate change and enhance her English skills, observed that while her translator was effective in relaying important information to her, the translation of her viewpoints to other participants was less efficient. She expressed, 'I was willing to speak. It was not easy for the translator to fully express my ideas and emotions. But if I spoke by myself, even if not very fluently, people would understand my opinions more directly,' highlighting the limitations in conveying personal perspectives and emotions through translation."

As the East Asian interviewee mentioned, there were doubts about the quality of translation in the GA. A more alarming instance was reported by the previously mentioned 30-year-old participant from South Asia. She and her translator observed that another individual, speaking the same native language, frequently had their viewpoints inaccurately translated or outright ignored by their translator. Notably, in both cases where translation quality was an issue, the participants were female, raising concerns about potential patriarchal biases in the translation process:

Allocation of responsibilities and resources

The Global Assembly's 'holocentric' or decentralized structure was a novel design response to the challenge of connecting, synchronizing, and engaging over 100 global citizens for three months. The division of tasks like assistance, connection, and the transmission of resources and information between the organizing team and Community Hosts, grouped by geographical regions and common languages, was key to its functioning. However, this structure resulted in most participant-organizer interactions being mediated by community hosts and translators. Although this approach facilitated the experience of Assembly Members, it also made them reliant on the efficacy of these collaborators. As previously discussed with translators and as will be explored regarding Community Hosts, such structural dependence highlights the necessity for the Global Assembly to rigorously monitor their performance throughout the process.

A Central African Assembly Member, despite receiving support from their Community Host and Translator, had to utilize personal resources to address unexpected challenges. The Global Assembly had a reimbursement policy for such unforeseen expenses, but the participant encountered issues with its implementation. After submitting a request for reimbursement through their Community Host, they only received a fraction of the expected amount. The participant explained, 'For instance, if the Global Assembly sends $100 for reimbursement for a cost I may have incurred, my Community Host will give me $10 instead of the full amount.' This shortfall in reimbursement added financial strain to the participant, who was already making significant contributions to the Assembly while relying on farming and agricultural activities for their primary income.

Despite these financial difficulties, motivated by their eagerness to continue participating and their reliance on the Community Host, this participant chose to persevere, resolving 'to liaise with them until when the Global Assembly project came to an end.' After the conclusion of the Global Assembly, the participant eventually received full financial reimbursement. Nevertheless, the financial, psychological, and political strains endured were significant, casting a shadow over the entirety of this Assembly Member's participatory journey.

CONCLUSION

Our study aimed to explore the "paradox of empowerment" in democratic innovations, specifically examining how increasing complexity in these processes might lead to more disadvantages for participants. In the context of the Global Assembly, we employed the concept of vulnerabilities to assess both the negative impacts and the emergence of improvisations and resilience due to the design and demands of the GA. Utilizing a grounded normative and constructivist methodology, we identified three primary factors influencing the

participatory vulnerabilities of citizens. This led to three main conclusions from our research that can ground recommendations to future transnational and digital citizens assemblies.

Firstly, we underscored the importance of constant monitoring and procedural adaptation in democratic innovations. Addressing evolving needs and unforeseen challenges promptly is essential to prevent participatory vulnerabilities from developing into significant disadvantages or harm. Our findings advocate for customized solutions tailored to specific contexts, as generic approaches, although important, often fail to adequately address these vulnerabilities.

Secondly, our study brought to light the complex role of participants' networks, including families, Community Hosts, and translators. These networks can be a source of substantial support but also pose potential barriers to participation. Conversely, incorporating families and cohabitants into the democratic process can make democratic innovations more collective and inclusive, moving beyond an individualistic nature and fostering networks of care between participants. This strategy not only boosts engagement but also distributes the burden of participation more fairly, effectively merging the personal and political spheres.

Finally, the research indicated that while support from Community Hosts and translators in the GA was crucial, there is a need to reduce participants' dependency on these intermediaries. This involves not merely outsourcing tasks but also developing participants' technology and language skills. Such an empowerment strategy enhances participant autonomy and goes beyond simple assistance. It fosters skill development, contributing to a more robust and dynamic democratic experience, essential for the success of digital and translational designs like the GA.

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