ASSEMBLIES
AS A *TOOL* FOR *JUST DEMOCRACY*

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Democracy, at its best, upholds our values and meets people's needs by delivering self-determination and effective governance, yet contemporary political systems often fall far short of this potential. In 2025, democracies in the U.S. and around the world are under enormous strain as governments struggle to provide people with a good, stable quality of life in the face of extreme concentrations of wealth, right-wing racist and xenophobic authoritarian threats and chaotic media ecosystems rife with inflammatory rhetoric and misinformation. This report looks at how *assemblies*—a key form of *collaborative governance*—can complement representative government and community organizing to deepen democracy and thereby improve the effectiveness of policy and government, advance equity and build trust in government and people's sense of interdependence and commitment to one another. This executive summary and report are accompanied on our website by case studies, tools, a summary table and links to more guides, tools and resources.

Collaborative governance

Collaborative governance (or *co-governance*)—in which community stakeholders and government work together to design, decide on and implement policies—is a key, and often underappreciated, part of the solution to the big challenges facing 21st-century governance. Collaborative governance can be especially effective when combined with community organizing, mutual aid, electoral organizing, legal strategies and other approaches.

Collaborative governance creates more just, equitable, democratic societies through several mechanisms. It complements community organizing by helping to translate community visions and priorities into public policies, programs and regulation more directly than outside advocacy, and it complements representative and administrative governance by providing ways for everyday people with a direct stake in political and economic systems to be part of how they are governed and to hold government and industries accountable. Strong collaborative governance centers equity, because people who are pushed to the margins of employment, health care, education, housing and every sector of our society have an inherent human right to live with dignity and also hold essential expertise that we need to make sure these systems work for everybody. When done well, collaborative governance can produce better ideas, policies, programs and implementation than when governments and communities work in isolation. Both communities and people in government have expertise and abilities that the other needs.

Assemblies

There are many models of collaborative governance, but an especially exciting one is *assemblies:* gatherings where large numbers of people come together to deliberate and make collective decisions. Assemblies are a powerful and underutilized tool to deepen democracy beyond elections, expand the realm of democratic control in our economy, advance equity and inclusion and improve the effectiveness of policy and government in ways that make a meaningful difference in people's lives and challenge the pull towards nativist, nihilistic politics.

Assemblies' power lies in their ability to bring people with a direct stake and lived experience in political and economic systems into helping govern how those systems work. They enable everyday people to be part of developing and implementing solutions, and to hold government and private industries accountable. They do not replace other institutions like legislative or executive governance, nor do they take the place of community organizing. Instead, they complement these institutions by helping governments deliver more effective policies and better outcomes and helping community and labor organizations better respond to their constituents and meet people's needs.

Assemblies have been practiced around the world for generations and can take many forms. Surveying assemblies around the world, we group them into three broad categories: *movement assemblies*, *policy assemblies* and what we call *governing-power assemblies*.

Movement assemblies are run by social-movement organizations for the primary purpose of building bottom-up power independent of government.

They include[1]:

» people's movement assemblies

» member-governance assemblies

» semi-spontaneous mass assemblies

» shadow assemblies

Policy assemblies are commissioned by governments or nonprofit organizations for the primary purpose of democratizing input into public policy, hold at least some degree of official recognition by governments and focus on creating a space for participatory, deliberative policy-making.

They include[1]:

» one-time lottery-selected civic assemblies[2]

» standing lottery-selected civic assemblies[2t]

» constituent assemblies

» constitutional assemblies

Govering-power assemblies are assemblies that are connected through formal structures or informal working relationships to government and the policy process, but also hold space for member-based social-movement organizations to shape the assemblies and build independent political power. They are designed to build equitable, inside-outside civic infrastructure and community power, which are essential foundations of a just democracy.

In this report, we primarily focus on people's movement assemblies, civic assemblies, and governing-power assemblies.

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1 Definitions of all these assembly subtypes are included in the report in and in the summary table.

2 In Europe and Latin America, civic assemblies are usually called citizens' assemblies. Because in the U.S., reactionaries have narrowed the term "citizen" to exclude immigrants from the policy and from civil and human rights, we use the term "civic assembly."

Proven success

Assemblies are a well-tested participatory democracy model with proven success around the world. From generations-old labor union conventions and Civil Rights Movement assemblies to the newer wave of assemblies during the Arab Spring, Occupy and Indignados movements, movement assemblies have helped social movements and community and labor organizations make participatory decisions, elect leaders, build accountability to their members and build shared visions, knowledge, skills and mobilization across diverse constituencies. Civic assemblies, meanwhile, have been implemented widely across Europe and the Americas in the last ten years from Brussels to Bogota to Bend, Oregon. They have helped politicians and the public build agreement around contentious issues like abortion in Ireland, brought popular participation into legislative processes in Austria and Paris, developed new education policy in Belgium, shaped the city budget in Melbourne and expanded civic infrastructure and capacity in towns in California, Colorado and Oregon. Governing-power assemblies in Barcelona and (as we explore in our case studies) in Jackson, Mississippi, the Bronx and Brazil have demonstrated the exciting potential of combining movement assemblies' power-building with policy assemblies' official role in public planning, policymaking, budgeting and oversight.

Assemblies have a proven ability to:

1   Facilitate robust and potentially equitable public participation

2   Be responsive to community needs, priorities and ideas

3   Improve policy design and effectiveness

4   Generate collective buy-in to policy decisions

5   Build individual and organizational civic capacity

On both sides, however, community members and people in government are often understandably skeptical that assemblies are worth the time, effort and money. Community organizations and the public often distrust governments' intentions and are wary of being subsumed in superficial public input processes that do not result in real change. Elected officials and government staff, for their part, are often already overburdened by procedural requirements and tired of hearing advocacy from the same voices, so may be skeptical that layering on yet more public participation will deliver enough benefits to justify the time and money needed to run an assembly. These are important concerns that should not be dismissed, nor should they be used to dismiss assemblies. These concerns, rather, should help guide important decisions around when assemblies are or are not the right model within a given context, which type of assembly would be the best fit and how the assembly should be designed, implemented and institutionalized.

Different models for different situations

Assemblies are not the best model for every situation because they are time and resource intensive. In many situations, simpler ways to collect people's input like a survey or an advisory committee might be a more efficient way for governments to move toward effective solutions. Similarly, other approaches like coalition-building, direct actions or lobbying might be better for moving community and labor organizations toward their goals.

Movement assemblies are best suited to situations when community and labor organizations deem it important to engage their full membership in deliberation and decision-making. At other times, smaller committees of staff and leaders are usually able to make decisions and carry out day-to-day work more swiftly.

Civic assemblies are most helpful for resolving multifaceted "wicked" policy questions that would benefit from intensive public deliberation and where power differentials between stakeholders would not hinder deliberation, compromise or implementation of assemblies' proposals. They are especially well suited to fostering public deliberation around land use planning and other ongoing areas of governance in instances when inequities are not a major problem; ethical issues like regulation of medical aid in dying, artificial intelligence and genetic engineering; and decisions about government in which legislators have a self-interest like redrawing legislative districts or determining legislators' salaries.

We call for both movement and civic assemblies to be implemented much more widely, and share a summary table describing the kinds of situations to which they are best suited. We also share case studies of movement and civic assemblies and links to guides and resources from other organizations on how to plan and implement them.

Governing-power assemblies are best employed in situations where there is a wicked policy problem to be solved but designing, agreeing on or implementing effective solutions is hindered because key stakeholders are excluded from, underrepresented in or disempowered in the political and policy process. This can occur in an economic sector in which a private power dominates a class of people (such as employers wielding power over workers), when an identity group like people of color or rural residents face pernicious disparities and injustices as a result of policies and governance or when strong, concentrated interests like corporate lobbies or ideological extremists block action on broadly popular policies like, in the U.S., gun control or paid sick leave.

We place much of our focus in the report on governing-power assemblies because we see especially exciting, untapped potential for them to reshape governance and deliver powerful results. By introducing stakeholder information, perspectives and proposals directly into policy processes and by simultaneously mobilizing organizing to counterbalance concentrated political and economic interests, governing-power assemblies enable better policy design, decisions and implementation. They also help rebalance power, and can help break political deadlocks by creating space for new political settlements around new policy proposals.

Deepening durability and impact through equity and power-building

Given the demonstrated strengths and achievements of movement, policy and governing-power assemblies, there is tremendous potential to expand all three models much more widely. Yet for all their strengths and potential, assemblies have faced challenges in recent years. Studying assemblies around the world, we have identified two big ones: building enduring political and financial support to keep assemblies going over time and deepening their impact on policy decisions, implementation and outcomes.

We therefore argue that assemblies and other collaborative governance initiatives should be designed around equity and community power-building as central goals. We call this *an equitable power-building approach*. An equitable power-building approach can help guide both community organizations and people in government through thinking through how to build relationships and alignment with each other, how to pilot assemblies and other co-governance models, how to build political and financial support for assemblies and how, over time, to institutionalize assemblies within community organizing and policy processes in ways that deepen assemblies' impact in policy and in people's lives.

An equitable power-building approach aims to design and implement assemblies and other collaborative governance models to:

1 **Reorient governance around the primary goal of guaranteeing that everyone's fundamental human needs are met through universal, equitably targeted, democratically controlled public goods** including education, healthcare, caregiving, housing, utilities, jobs, income security and healthy, clean and safe environments.

2 **Create equitable governance processes** that bring everyday people, especially those on the frontlines of injustice, into direct participation in policymaking and policy implementation.

3 **Achieve measurable, equitable changes in policy decisions and policy outcomes** that are meaningful and palpable in people's lives.

4 **Establish effective monitoring, accountability and enforcement** to hold both government and private economic actors accountable to their responsibilities to the public good and human rights.

5 **Distribute power** by identifying communities whose needs are inadequately met by traditional governance, cultivating active civic participation and leadership among them, and building their community organization, capacity and power both inside and outside of government.

6 **Institutionalize assemblies and participatory democracy** as essential ongoing components of democratic governance in connection with elections, representative democracy and public administration.

Institutionalizing assemblies in government, policy processes and movements

In practice, governments and community and labor organizations can put an equitable power-building approach into action by institutionalizing assemblies and other collaborative governance models into government, public policy processes and community organizing.

When civic and governing-power assemblies are embedded in government and the policy process, they help government to:

» Engage more people in governance, and do so more inclusively and more equitably

» Increase responsiveness to community needs, priorities and ideas

» Improve policy design and policy implementation

» Build political buy-in behind tough policy and budgetary decisions

» Enhance public trust

» Strengthen civic capacity

When community and labor organizations weave assemblies into how they govern their organizations coalitions, assemblies can help them:

» Build knowledge, skills and capacity

» Grow their membership bases, strengthen member and staff leadership and strengthen their coalitions

» Institute direct lines of accountability to people on the frontlines of injustice

» Build power to shape public policy decisions and policy outcomes

Governing-power assemblies help with all of the above goals and can additionally:

» Encourage community members to participate in an assembly by giving them a direct opportunity to influence government power-holders

» Develop interpersonal working relationships between community members and government staff and elected officials

» Develop formal co-governance structures that institutionalize community power in government

» Introduce more community accountability into policy implementation to ensure policy wins are upheld and implemented effectively

Recommendations

The report closes with six strategic directions that governments, philanthropy, community organizations, researchers and participatory democracy practitioners can pursue in the coming years to deepen assemblies' durability and impact and to scale them much more widely in movements and governance.

1 Center equity and power in assembly goals, design and implementation.

2 Pilot and evaluate assemblies.

3 Institutionalize assemblies in movements and government, including institutionalizing governing-power assemblies horizontally into community organizing and power-building, vertically into government and longitudinally over time throughout the entire cycle of policymaking and policy implementation.

4 Resource assemblies to provide money and staffing for planning, execution and follow up and to develop the civic infrastructure needed to support assemblies and collaborative governance from year to year.

5 Build the skills, knowledge and other capabilities of both community members and people in government to support successful assemblies and collaborative governance.

6 Build networks linking local assembly efforts and share lessons across them.

Assemblies are not a panacea to all the challenges facing democratic societies, but when strategically implemented, they significantly enhance inclusive, effective and equitable governance. By institutionalizing assemblies and other collaborative governance models and supporting independent community organizing, civic capacity and movement-building, societies can create more just, responsive and effective democratic systems and improve outcomes in peoples' lives.
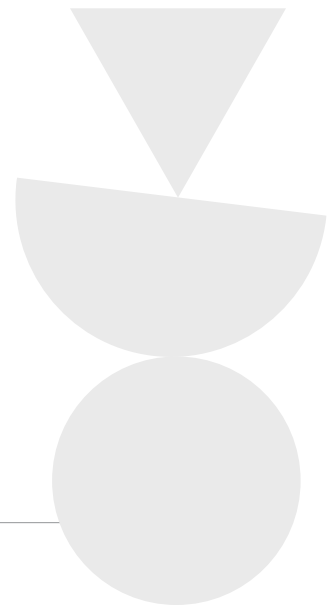
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