

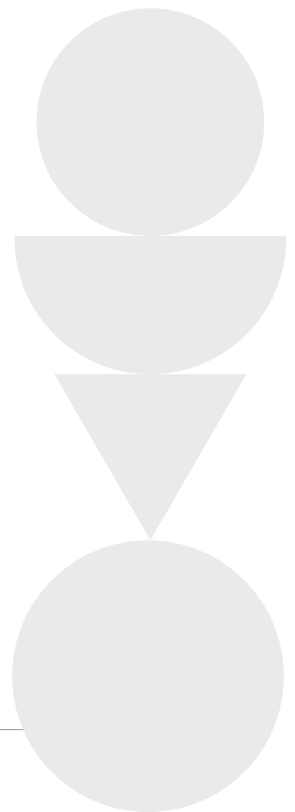
INITIATING COMMUNITY-GOVERNMENT COLLABORATION

ASSEMBLIES AS A TOOL FOR JUST DEMOCRACY

PARTNERS  FOR
DIGNITY & RIGHTS

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PURPOSE

This tool is for community organizations and public agency staff who are interested in assemblies and collaborative governance. It is designed to help them explore possibilities for community-government collaboration, build relationships and work toward implementing assemblies or other collaborative governance models together. This tool accompanies our report, "[Assemblies as a Tool for Just Democracy](#)," and draws in part from *Race Forward's* [Co-Governance Tool for Multiracial Democracy](#) and *Health in Partnership's* [Five Dimensions of Inside-Outside Strategy](#) guide and toolkit, both of which are excellent resources that we recommend.

Before outlining steps that community organizations and public agencies can take toward collaboration, it is worth noting a few things. First, local context and relationships matter enormously: there is no one-size-fits-all process for exploring and initiating assemblies and collaborative governance, so feel free to adapt the following guidance to your needs. Second, we recommend thinking about pursuing the following steps iteratively so that as you build relationships, those relationships and your conversations with people continually inform your thinking and next steps. Lastly, we recommend leaning into small-scale experimentation by finding ways to test out collaboration around small efforts, learning from that experience and adapting and growing as you move forward.

GUIDANCE FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZATIONS

I. Assessing conditions

- 1 **Identify your goal.** Are you looking to build an assembly that serves as a broad democratic container to identify, prioritize and shape community priorities at large or do you have a specific policy challenge that you are focused on? If you are looking to build a broad, open-ended assembly, think rigorously about what value you expect the assembly to add and how you envision the assembly complementing and coordinating with existing legislative and administrative governance institutions and processes. If you are looking to build an issue-specific assembly, think through whether your policy question involves a “[wicked problem](#)” in which there are multiple values, priorities, stakeholders and viewpoints that must be weighed. If you are dealing with a more straightforward problem, there are probably more straightforward ways of addressing it than creating an assembly.
- 2 **Identify which government agencies, offices or legislative committees hold responsibility** for the issues or policy questions your assembly would focus on. The more you are able to focus on a specific issue or policy question, the easier it will be to narrow your focus to one agency with whom you could potentially work. It is not impossible to launch an assembly while engaging with multiple agencies, but interfacing with multiple agencies will multiply the amount of work you have to do to build relationships, build support for assemblies, implement them, and follow through on policy action. It is also possible to launch assemblies that engage with legislators across policy sectors, but these tend to have a narrower point of intervention like developing policy proposals on a single issue at a time (like the [Brussels’ Deliberative Committees](#)) or only making decisions around capital expenditures in the budget (like most participatory budgeting processes).
- 3 Within the key agencies, offices or committees you map out, **identify specific individual decision-makers, departments and processes** that shape decision-making around policies, resourcing and implementation.
- 4 **Identify which community, labor, faith or other organizations have a stake in an assembly.**
- 5 **Find out about and evaluate current and past participatory governance efforts** in your political jurisdiction. Assess their strengths and weaknesses and figure out what people inside and outside of government think about them.

- 6 If government is already running or collaborating on an assembly that you did not initiate, **clarify your larger goals, evaluate the pros and cons of getting involved and strategize about how to align your involvement with those larger goals.** KNOCA's "[Making the Most of Climate Assemblies: Playbook for Civil Society Organisations](#)" offers helpful guidance for such scenarios.

II. Building relationships

- 1 **Hold conversations with the key community and government stakeholders** to understand their goals, priorities and openness to collaborating with you around assemblies. Also assess if there are any key constituencies who are unorganized and underrepresented by an existing organization, and see if you can find an informal community leader who can speak to where folks are and how you might be able to involve them in an assembly. Do more listening than talking to build rapport with everyone and to find out the tenor of people's relationships and levels of trust with different community organizations and across government. Listen for what they're excited about and also for their questions and skepticism about assemblies and collaborative governance. Health in Partnership offers [helpful guidance](#) on how to plan for collaboration and how to conduct a one-on-one meeting.
- 2 **Engage with government stakeholders in public processes** like public meetings and hearings to build your visibility and credibility with them and to learn more about governance processes.
- 3 Through your engagement, **find champions within government** who are willing to co-strategize with you and advocate for assemblies.
- 4 **Identify which community organizations might want to co-convene an assembly, and identify which entities within government—agencies, offices or the legislature—might be potential funders, authorizers, collaborators and decision-makers to target.** Talk to them about it.

III. Laying the groundwork

- 1 **Develop strategic alignment**
 - a. **Convene a working group:** Bring your community, labor, faith or other partners together to form a working group to steer your effort to envision, establish, design and run an assembly. Decide whether to invite government representatives to join the working group or whether you will work with them more informally at a slight distance.

- b. **Build internal alignment:** Build alignment among the working group on your goals, vision, issue focus(es) and guiding questions, and decide how you will work together.
- c. **Do power mapping:** Complete a power-mapping exercise together to assess who holds decision-making power to implement an assembly, which stakeholders might be aligned with you, who might be opposed and how you can build support for your vision.
- d. **Develop a strategy and plan of action together.**

2 Develop a community vision

- a. **Gather community input** on what needs or priorities are most pressing for people.
- b. Review those community needs and priorities and **identify what is hindering effective solutions**. Look for issue areas where there is not yet a clear solution to be implemented and in which community assemblies and community-government collaboration could therefore deliver the most impact. (When a clear solution has already been identified but not yet implemented, assemblies are not the best way to drive action.)
- c. Develop public outreach narratives, materials and strategies to **educate and engage the public** about your focal issues and the potential for assemblies.
- d. **Research assembly models and case studies**, and envision what kind of an assembly model might make sense in your community.
- e. **Engage legal and policy experts** for advice on your focal issue(s) and governance processes.
- f. Together with your member base and community partners, **build a collective vision around assemblies and collaborative governance, a shared assessment of conditions, and joint strategies** for advancing assemblies and collaborative governance.

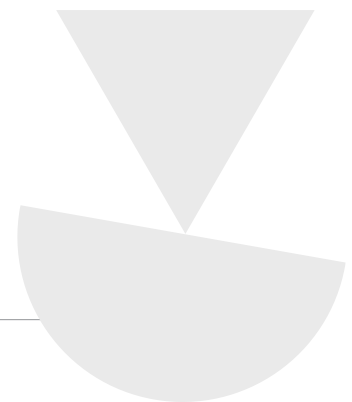
3 Build civic capacity and political support

- a. **Engage and organize your base of supporters in the community.**
- b. **Build relationships and strategic alignment with other community, labor and faith organizations.** Talk one on one with community leaders and cultivate space for members of different organizations to meet each other and develop shared visions together. Work to grow your coalition and to deepen your strategic alignment with your coalition partners.

- c. Use petitions, public forms, civic engagement websites and other tools to **engage community members**.
- d. **Document and share people's stories** to make the case for your priority issues and for collaborative governance.
- e. **Produce your own media, and engage journalists** to get coverage.
- f. **Strengthen community organizations' internal leadership and governance structures**.
- g. **Train community members to build their civic knowledge, skills and readiness**.
- h. **Secure organizational, political and financial commitments** for assemblies from decision-makers in government, foundations and community organizations.
- i. **Form a steering committee** that brings key stakeholders together with experts in participatory democracy and your focal issue(s) to co-design and co-implement the assembly process.

4 Pilot

- a. If you have yet to get traction with government, **organize small community pilot assemblies** to demonstrate the potential of participatory governance. Invite people from government to attend and listen.
- b. As you get more buy-in from government, **initiate a small collaborative pilot with government staff or an elected official** to figure out how to work together, give everyone some experience with participatory democracy and build a demonstration project that helps make the case for government and foundations to provide further funding and political backing for assemblies.
- c. From the very beginning of your pilot process, **plan for evaluation and follow-up to the assembly** to decide how you will document the assembly, evaluate it and learn from the experience to refine your assembly model and make a case for continuing assemblies.
- d. **Allocate money and staff time for your pilot**, accounting not just for executing assemblies but also for pre-assembly planning and post-assembly follow-through. Look to secure in-kind resources like meeting spaces, food and materials too.



GUIDANCE FOR GOVERNMENTS

I. Building relationships

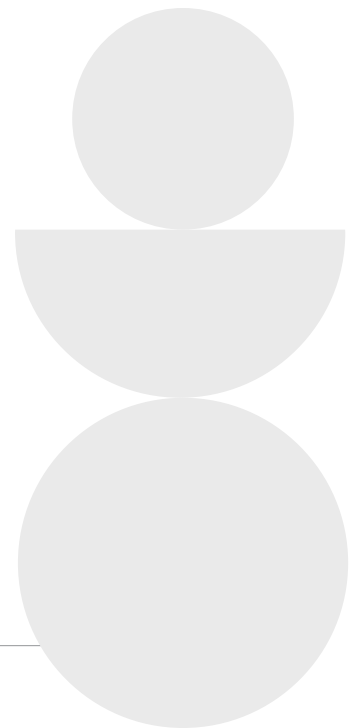
- 1 **Identify key communities** whose needs are underserved by the status quo and who have a stake in developing effective policies and governance processes. **Identify organizations and community leaders** who represent these communities, as well as communities who are underorganized and underrepresented.
- 2 **Identify government agencies, offices, legislative committees and other government stakeholders** involved in policy making and policy implementation.
- 3 **Hold one-on-one meetings with community and government stakeholders.** Do more listening than talking to build rapport and to find out about people's relationships and levels of trust across community organizations and different entities within government. Find out their hopes and goals as well as their questions and skepticism about assemblies and collaborative governance. Ask them what participatory governance efforts already exist and how they and others feel about those.
- 4 **Take concrete actions to build community trust and capacity**, such as providing funding to community organizations; sharing organizational charts and demystifying governance processes with them; and involving them in visioning, research, planning, crafting policies and decision-making.

II. Assessing conditions

- 1 **Reflecting on your conversations with different community and government stakeholders, assess their level of interest in an assembly and their readiness**, level of trust in other stakeholders, resources, experience and organizational capacity.
- 2 **Evaluate existing participatory governance processes to assess how they are seen by community and government stakeholders**, where they fall along the spectrum of community power (see the "Giving assemblies meaningful power" section of our Assemblies report) and whether they could serve as building blocks for assemblies and deeper collaborative governance or they are not the right starting point.

III. Laying the groundwork

- 1 Identify supporters of assemblies across government, as well as gaps in political support and institutional capacity** that would be needed to launch and implement assemblies. Work to build that support and capacity.
- 2 Secure funding and staff time** to support assemblies.
- 3 Identify concrete roles and powers an assembly could have in the policy process, and identify commitments that government agencies and electeds could make around the assembly,** particularly around how to give assembly participants independence to deliberate freely and how the legislature or public agencies will respond to and follow up on the assembly's recommendations. Work with decision-makers in government to secure those roles, powers and commitments.
- 4 Work with community partners to pilot an assembly or smaller collaboration** to build your working relationship together, test the model and develop proof of concept to build buy-in for assemblies within government and among stakeholders, the public, philanthropy or other parties. From the very beginning of your pilot process, plan for evaluation and follow-up to the assembly to decide how you will document the assembly, evaluate it and learn from the experience to refine your assembly model and make a case for continuing assemblies.



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