ASSEMBLIES AS A TOOL FOR JUST DEMOCRACY

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INTRODUCTION

The urgency of democratization

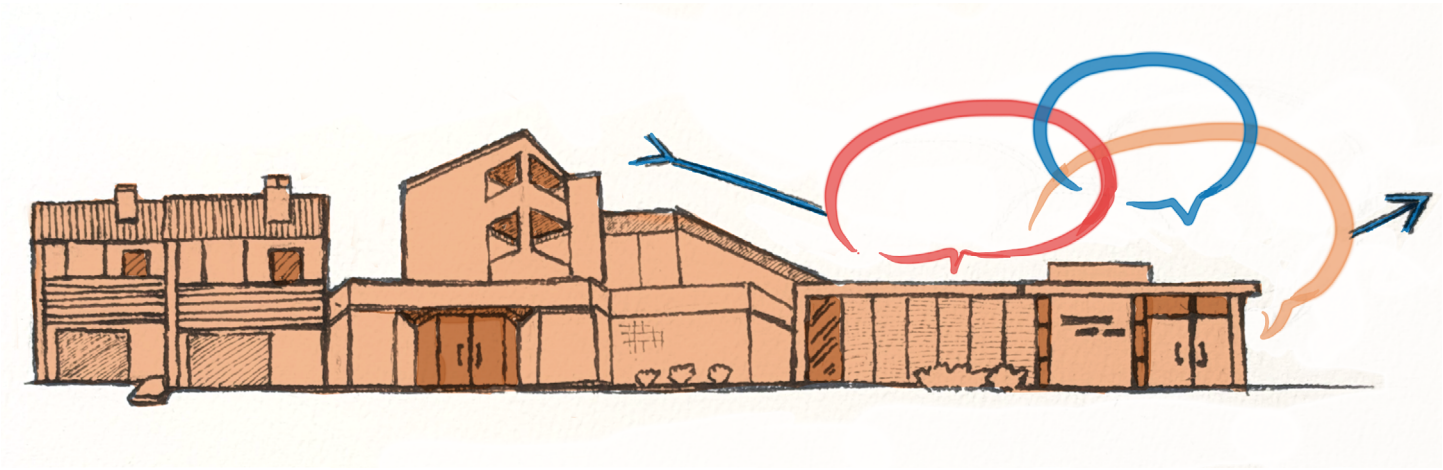
Through the second half of the twentieth century as dictatorships and colonial empires fell and as literacy and living standards rose around the world, many people assumed the world was on an inexorable march toward democracy. At its best, "democracy"—derived from the Greek word *dēmokratia*, meaning "rule by the people"—upholds individuals' and communities' political self-determination, delivers public goods that meet our needs, fosters effective and responsive governance and strengthens social solidarity across diverse populations. Yet real-world democracies have never fully realized this potential, and today, democracies around the world are under enormous strain.

In the United States, as in much of the rest of the world, decades of neoliberal governance have shrunk democratic control over whole swaths of the economy by shifting power to markets, built up the military and police state while slashing systems of care, driven up the cost of living, pushed people into precarity and inflated racial, economic, gender, geographic and generational inequality to extreme and destabilizing levels. Faced by unresponsive and sclerotic governance, people have lost trust in governments and all kinds of institutions from media to universities, science and public health. People's legitimate frustrations have been amplified, distorted and inflamed by money in politics and by new communications technologies like social media that spread misinformation and trap us in cycles of outrage. Climate change and artificial technology threaten to further accelerate this destabilization. Driving and capitalizing on all this are right-wing ethno-nationalists, religious fundamentalists and their corporate and billionaire co-conspirators, who scapegoat immigrants, transgender people and other communities as they systematically undercut democratic institutions, the rule of law, human rights, community institutions and our trust in and sense of interdependence with our fellow humans.

Committed public servants, elected officials and legal strategists are doing enormously important work within government to oppose attacks on democracy and the rule of law, and to try to build more inclusive, responsive and effective institutions, but they face enormous challenges. Many in government feel powerless in the face of fragmented authority, federal and state preemption, budget deficits, decades of accumulated procedural requirements and advocacy that favors the wealthiest interests and the loudest unrepresentative voices.

At the same time, community advocates and organizers who are pushing to transform our democracy and reshape systems from the outside often find themselves stuck in endless cycles of campaigning that can deliver small victories, but have struggled to set us on a different course. The broader public, meanwhile, is frustrated with what they see as endless partisan arguments and handwringing that never seem to deliver changes that they can see and feel, deepening people's loss of trust in government and democracy itself.

This can all feel bleak, but there is also real cause for hope. Most people are not authoritarians or nihilists: they are family members, workers, neighbors and community members who care about people, value self-determination and want to live their lives in peace. People are frustrated with how government works today, but still tend to believe in democratic institutions. Though they can sometimes feel compelled by demagoguery and scapegoating of "others" when their lives feel precarious, most people's priority isn't lashing out but securing good, stable lives for themselves and their loved ones. People can be persuaded to support inclusive, multiracial democracy if democracy can effectively deliver what they care about in their lives.



There are no silver bullets, but collaborative governance that involves everyday people in making and implementing the policies that shape their lives should be recognized as a foundational cornerstone of healthy democracies and just societies in the twenty-first century. Representative government today—whether measured by who votes, who shows up to public meetings, who is elected to office, who has a direct line to power-holders or whose policies get passed—overwhelmingly favors elites. This is not only unjust because it effectively marginalizes and excludes huge swaths of the public from meaningful influence in policy; it is also bad governance. People who are pushed to the margins in employment, health care, education, housing and every sector of our society hold essential expertise that we need to make sure these systems work for everybody. Thus, rather than simply relying on elected representatives, government staff and private industries to get policy

right on their own, we need to build out a set of complementary collaborative governance mechanisms that provide ways for everyday people who have a direct stake in both public and private systems to be part of how they are governed and to be able to hold both government and industries accountable.

Collaborative governance

Governance is the process of governing society. It includes both the key functions of government—policymaking, policy implementation, administering public programs, regulating private sectors, taxation, public spending, the judiciary and enforcement of laws—as well as private governance in which companies, professional associations, religious groups and other organizations and institutions exercise rulemaking, self-regulation, enforcement and other powers over sectors of the economy and society. Governance of most sectors is a blend of public and private governance.

> **Governance** is the process of governing society, and includes both **public governance** by government and **private governance** by organizations and institutions like companies, professional associations and religious groups.

Collaborative governance or ***co-governance*** is a collection of participatory models and practices in which government and communities share power by working together through formal and informal structures and relationships to make collective policy decisions, co-create programs to meet community needs and ensure those policies and programs are implemented effectively. Collaborative governance enables everyday people who have a direct stake in economic systems to engage directly with elected officials and especially with public agencies to help shape policies and make sure those systems work for everybody.

> **Collaborative governance** is a collection of participatory models and practices in which government and communities share power by working together through formal and informal structures to make collective policy decisions, co-create programs to meet community needs and ensure those policies and programs are implemented effectively.

Co-governance models range significantly in how much power they give to participants. Common forms of participatory governance today like government-initiated task forces, public comment periods and town halls are an entrypoint to collaborative governance, but don't give participants much room for meaningful participation. More robust forms of collaborative governance go beyond collecting public input by drawing on community stakeholders' expertise and moving toward deeper collaboration between government and stakeholders in setting the public agenda, formulating policies, making decisions and cooperating around implementation, evaluation and oversight. This kind of collaboration is very common between government and private industries, but there is a big dearth of robust collaborative governance involving workers, local residents and other constituencies. Assemblies are one of the best mechanisms for structuring community-driven collaborative governance.

Who is the "community"?

Definitions of "***community***" abound: the term can refer to the entire public represented by government, to geographically defined groups like residents of a neighborhood, to interest-based groups like the medical community or to identity-based groups like Black women. In this report when we refer to *community,* we are pointing to *economic groups* or *interest groups* who have a direct personal stake in economic systems including employment, health care, housing, education, environmental stewardship and public welfare programs, and also to *social groups* or *identity-based groups* who, because of their racial, gender, national or other identities, have faced unique, discriminatory barriers to political power and to the fulfillment of their human rights within these systems. We also refer to people in broad economic interest groups as *stakeholders* and to people at the intersection of interest- and identity-based groups as *frontline communities.*

Assemblies

One key mechanism of co-governance is ***assemblies***: gatherings where large numbers of people come together to deliberate and make collective decisions. Assemblies have their origins in social movements and labor unions, where they help build collectivity and facilitate participatory decision-making, and are increasingly being adapted and brought into government and official policymaking processes.

> **Assemblies** are gatherings in which large numbers of people come together to deliberate and make collective decisions.

Assemblies are a powerful yet 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.

This report argues for significantly expanding assemblies in public governance. The "Types of Assemblies" section provides a typology of different types of assemblies. The "Strengths, Limitations and the Challenges of Impact and Durability" section looks at when assemblies are and are not the right governance mechanism for different situations, and discusses two key challenges assemblies have often struggled with: maintaining political and financial durability and achieving substantial policy impacts. The "Deepening Impact and Political Durability through an Equitable Power-Building Approach" section discusses how what we call an equitable, power-building approach to assemblies can enable assemblies to build their durability and increase their impact, and contrasts this with tendencies toward deliberative, reformist and separatist politics. The "Institutionalizing

Assemblies in Movement-Building, Government and Policy Processes" section discusses how assemblies can be institutionalized in three dimensions: vertically into government, horizontally into social movements and longitudinally throughout the policy process. The report concludes with recommendations for organizers, advocates, government officials and staff and philanthropy, and is accompanied by case studies, a summary table, two tools and links to more resources.

While no single solution can address all the challenges democracies face, when assemblies are implemented as part of a broader power-building strategy, they can make governance more effective, responsive, just and inclusive. Assemblies and other participatory democracy models are not a cure-all to everything that ails democracy (nothing is), but they are a powerful mechanism that can help build the robust, equitable, democratic forms of governance and community organization that we need. When instituted at the right points in policymaking and intentionally designed to correct inequity, exclusion and power imbalances, direct stakeholder participation through assemblies can add important insights, leadership and accountability that improve the effectiveness of policies and governance for everyone.

Though assemblies have a long and well-proven track record, we are still learning how to design, execute and institutionalize them in ways that complement representative and executive government, improve governance processes and correct the inequalities, inequities and lack of government responsiveness that drive so many problems. We hope this report offers useful frameworks and examples to help community organizers and advocates, elected officials, government staff, participatory democracy practitioners, philanthropy and others build a more participatory and democratic future.

TYPES OF ASSEMBLIES

There are multiple forms of assemblies around the world that share many commonalities but also have key differences. To help map the assembly landscape, we have created a typology in which we categorize assemblies in three main groups: ***movement assemblies*** run by social-movement organizations for the primary purpose of building bottom-up power, ***policy assemblies*** commissioned by governments or nonprofit organizations for the primary purpose of democratizing input into public policy, and what we are calling ***governing-power assemblies,*** which combine features of both movement and policy assemblies. In this section we offer definitions of these forms of assemblies and various sub-types, and describe how all three types can be federated.

In practice, many real-world assemblies do not fit neatly into the definitions we offer here, and many assemblies evolve, hybridize and move between categories over time. Our intention is not to define other people's work for them or shoehorn specific assembly efforts into rigid categories. Rather, by offering these ideal types, we hope to offer a typology that draws out similarities and differences between various assemblies.

Movement assemblies are assemblies that are wholly controlled by social-movement organizations with no official involvement or recognition by government. There are at least five prevalent forms. ***People's movement assemblies*** are organizing vehicles that are designed as a process and space through which one or more organizations' membership bases come together for political education, leadership development and community building toward some form of collective action. ***Policy-platform assemblies*** are movement assemblies convened by one or more organizations for attendees to develop and ratify a joint policy platform. ***Member-governance assemblies*** are an ongoing, institutionalized part of some member-based organizations', coalitions' and political parties' internal governance process in which members are asked to elect leaders and vote on resolutions, policy platforms and other internal questions. ***Semi-spontaneous mass assemblies*** emerge in moments of political crisis and rupture when large numbers of people pour into the streets and come together to form new collective political spaces. ***Shadow assemblies*** are designed to parallel and contrast with official, top-down policymaking when government refuses to bring people into the official policymaking process.

For illustrative purposes (again, our intention is not define anyone's assemblies for them), one might point to examples of people's movement assemblies in Southern Movement Assemblies across the U.S. South, the Poor People's Campaign's Mass Poor People's & Low Wage Workers' Assembly and movement assemblies assemblies across Latin America. Examples of policy platform assemblies might include 'Āina Aloha Economic Futures, the initial Bronxwide Plan assemblies and the South Los Angeles Health and

Human Rights Conferences. Union conventions like AFL-CIO conventions are examples of member-governance assemblies, Occupy Wall Street and Puerto Rico's 2019 assemblies are examples of semi-spontaneous mass assemblies, and Belgium's G1000 and the Global Assembly are examples of shadow assemblies paralleling Belgium's parliament and a UN climate conference, respectively.

Policy assemblies can be commissioned by either governments or by non-governmental organizations to give participants space for independent deliberation to work through a "wicked" policy challenge together and propose solutions. In contrast to movement assemblies, policy assemblies hold at least some degree of official recognition by governments as playing a role in the policy process, and they have primary focus on creating a space for participatory, deliberative policymaking as opposed to movement assemblies' primary focus on building independent, extra-governmental people power. Policy assemblies vary in how they select assembly participants, in which kinds of entities design and run the assemblies, in how much the government defines the purpose and parameters of the assembly and in whether the assembly holds advisory or decision-making power in policymaking. Policy assemblies include ***one-time lottery-selected civic assemblies*** (often called "***citizens' assemblies***" outside the U.S.[1]) that are convened to provide recommendations on a single policy question, ***standing lottery-selected civic assemblies*** that are institutionalized as ongoing bodies with an advisory, recommendatory or oversight role in public governance, ***constituent assemblies*** that have open participation for all members of a political community who want to attend (sometimes just citizens, sometimes all residents) and ***constitutional assemblies*** that are convened either as part of regular constitutional maintenance (as in U.S. states) or in moments of major national crisis.

We focus in this report on the two types of civic assemblies. 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. In such instances, popular participation in lottery-selected assemblies can help depoliticize and diffuse what might otherwise be polarized, partisan competition between organized political elites. Standing civic assemblies hold particularly exciting possibilities, and should be much more widely implemented to introduce public priorities, input and oversight into legislative processes.

Examples of one-off civic assemblies include British Columbia's Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, the Irish Citizens' Assembly, the Petaluma Fairgrounds Advisory Panel on land use planning in Petaluma, California, the Civic Assembly on Youth Homelessness in Deschutes County, Oregon. Examples of standing civic assemblies include Brussels' Deliberative Committees, East Belgium's Citizens' Council and Citizens' Assemblies,

1 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 polity and from civil and human rights, we use the term "civic assembly."

Paris's Citizens' Assembly and metropolitan Toronto's Planning Review Panel and Metrolinx Reference Panel.

What we are calling ***governing-power assemblies*** combine the powers of the two prevailing forms of assemblies, movement assemblies and policy assemblies, with the goal of building equitable inside-outside community power to reshape governance. They are connected through formal structures or informal working relationships to government and the policy process, and simultaneously hold space for member-based social-movement organizations to shape the assemblies and build independent power. In governing-power assemblies, both government and community groups play key roles. Government integrates the assemblies into the institutions and processes of government, and movement organizations ground assemblies in equitable participation by marginalized and underserved communities while also building the equitable, independent civic infrastructure and community power that are necessary cornerstones of a just democratic society. Together, these complementary roles imbue governing-power assemblies with the potential to make substantial impacts in policy and people's lives.

Examples of governing-power assemblies include the Jackson People's Assembly in Jackson, Mississippi, Community Assemblies in Washington State, the Bronxwide Plan assemblies in recent years, Barcelona En Comú's assemblies in Spain and participatory budgeting assemblies in the 1990s and early 2000s in Porto Alegre, Brazil.

When institutionalized at scale, movement, policy and governing-power assemblies can all be federated. ***Federated assemblies*** or ***civic congresses*** are mass governance structures in which smaller assemblies with broad participation feed delegates and input into a larger organization-wide or region-wide assembly in which delegates make decisions on behalf of all of the assemblies. Political party and labor unions conventions are examples of ***federated member-governance assemblies,*** the Wisconsin Conservation Congress is an example of a federated constituent assembly and Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting assemblies in the 1990s and early 2000s were an example of a ***federated governing-power assembly.***

We further describe these types of assemblies and which situations they are best suited to in the table accompanying this report.

STRENGTHS, LIMITATIONS AND THE CHALLENGES OF IMPACT AND DURABILITY

Assemblies offer a number of strengths that make them a strong complement to other forms of representative and participatory democracy. They can facilitate robust and potentially equitable public participation, bringing diverse and underrepresented perspectives and expertise into governance. They improve government's and organizations' responsiveness to community needs, priorities and ideas by improving communication and accountability. By engaging people with lived experience in policy matters, they can improve policy design and implementation, delivering better outcomes in people's lives. When tough trade-offs must be made, they can help generate collective buy-in around policy, budgetary, coalitional and other decisions. Assemblies can also help grow individuals', organizations' and institutions' civic capabilities and commitment, building the collective capacity needed for robust democracies and just, effective governance.

Strengths of assemblies

- Facilitate robust and potentially equitable public participation
- Responsive to community needs, priorities and ideas
- Improve policy design and effectiveness
- Generate collective buy-in to policy decisions
- Build individual and organizational civic capacity

Given all these strengths, there is tremendous potential to institutionalize assemblies far more widely in governance, but they are not the right model for every situation. Assemblies create space for thoughtful public deliberation, but deliberation can't solve every problem: political contestation will always play an important role in democratic societies. Because of assemblies' size and intensity (assemblies involve dozens, hundreds or thousands of participants who meet for multiple hours or multiple days), other smaller participatory models like community advisory boards, tripartite governing boards or civic juries can be a better alternative to a full-scale assembly. Along with these and other models of collaborative governance, assemblies should be a fundamental part of robust, democratic societies that are as familiar to people as jury duty and voting.

Assemblies have been implemented across the U.S. and around the world, with especially significant momentum in recent years in Latin America and Europe. Recent assemblies have achieved major victories, including allocating millions of dollars to community projects through participatory budgeting, beginning to shift public attention and dollars toward fixing Jackson, Mississippi's ailing water system, guiding Irish voters towards legalizing abortion in a national referendum and building ongoing public input into metropolitan planning and governance in Bogota, Toronto, Brussels, Paris and other cities.

Yet in practice, assemblies everywhere have struggled to effect significant changes in policy decisions and policy implementation that make a significant meaningful in people's lives, and have also struggled to maintain political and financial support over time. Policy recommendations from assemblies do not always translate into policy decisions nor into effective, accountable policy implementation by government. Civic assemblies and participatory budgeting (which utilizes assemblies) have often been constrained in their scope and decision-making power, government-commissioned assemblies of all kinds have often been implemented by one political party only to be dissolved later by another, and movement assemblies have often struggled to translate their political visions and policy platforms into governing power and policy changes that palpably change people's lives.

Key Challenges

- Deepening assemblies' impact on policy decisions, policy implementation and real-world policy outcomes
- Building assemblies' political, financial and organizational durability, particularly across elections and political administrations

Fully defining impact is beyond the scope of this report, but for civic, movement and governing-power assemblies that aim to influence public policy, there are a number of important dimensions of impact:

1 PEOPLE

- **Participants:** How do participants experience the assembly? Does their sense of belonging or civic awareness, efficacy or engagement increase?
- **Stakeholders:** Do organized stakeholder groups see the assembly process as legitimate and effective? Does the assembly shift any of their positions or help broker compromise?
- **Polity:** What does the broader public beyond assembly participants know and think about the assembly? Does it have any effect on their policy positions or civic engagement?[2]

2 The March 2023 issue of the *Journal of Representative Democracy* explores assemblies' impact in the eyes of stakeholder groups

2 COMMITMENT AND CAPACITY

- **Community:** Does the assembly increase organization, alignment, capacity and commitment among community organizations and constituencies?
- **Government:** Does the assembly normalize and build support for collaborative governance among electeds and government staff? Does it increase government agencies' ability to effectively engage in collaborative governance?

3 POLICY

- **Policy decisions:** Does the assembly have any direct authority or influence in policy decisions? Does the assembly influence the outcome of policy decisions?
- **Policy outcomes:** Does the assembly influence the policy implementation process, have direct involvement in implementation or have a role in oversight and monitoring? Does it change real-world policy outcomes in ways that are measurable and felt by the public?

Existing evidence is clear that well-designed civic and movement assemblies are a powerful experience for their participants. The other measures of impact, which focus on what happens outside and after assemblies, are often more difficult to measure and have been less studied by evaluators and researchers.[3] The evidence we do have shows that the external impact of many civic and (where they have aimed to influence policy) movement assemblies has, so far, been limited. This highlights the need to attend not just to what happens within assemblies, but how they operate within political and economic dynamics, and how they are embedded within larger institutions of government, social movements and policy.

3 Lynne Poole and Stephen Elstub offer one useful approach to measuring policy impact in their article "Mini-publics and policy impact analysis: filtration in the citizens' assembly on social care" in the journal Policy Sciences.

DEEPENING IMPACT AND POLITICAL DURABILITY THROUGH AN EQUITABLE POWER-BUILDING APPROACH

An equitable power-building approach to governance

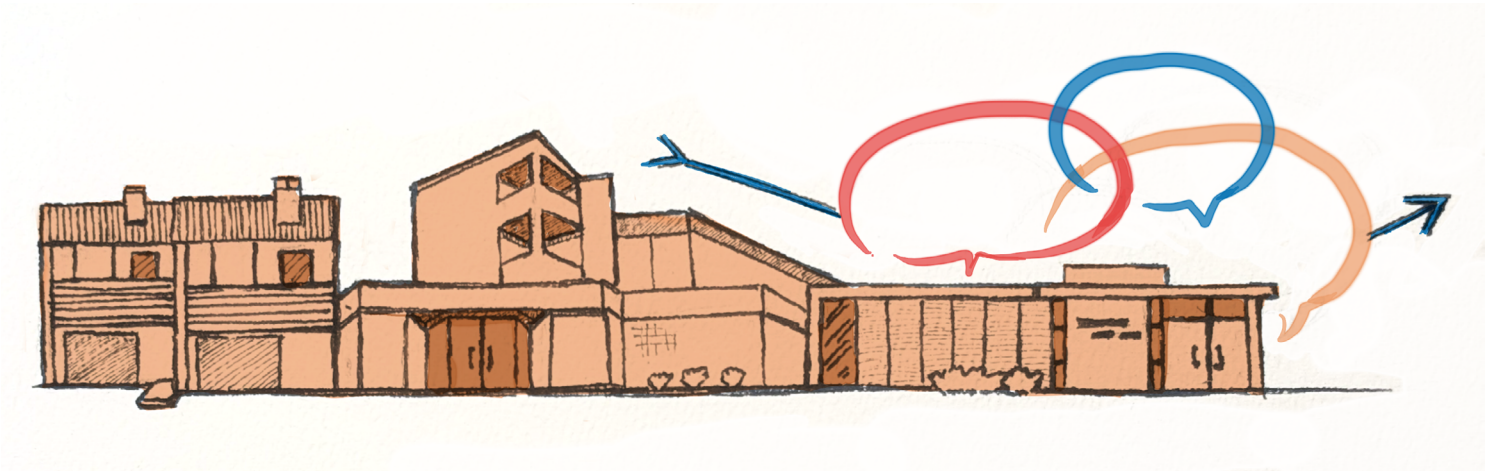
The two big challenges facing assemblies today are delivering a substantial policy impact in people's lives and establishing political, organizational and financial support to sustain assemblies over many years. For civic assemblies in particular, shifting toward an equitable power-building approach can help solve both these challenges. Whereas civic assemblies are designed to inject public input into the official policy process and movement assemblies to hold space for autonomous community gatherings, ***an equitable power-building approach*** uses assemblies as a tool intended to reshape democratic institutions of governance. Key goals of an equitable power-building approach to governance are to:

1. **Reorient governance around the primary goal of guaranteeing everyone's fundamental human needs are met through universal, equitably targeted, democratically controlled public goods** including education, housing, health care, utilities, work with dignity, income and 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.

Orienting governance and assemblies around these goals is essential if we are to deepen assemblies' impact. Governing-power assemblies therefore stand to play an important—and so far dramatically underexplored role—in reshaping governance. Governing-power assemblies can be a strong intervention in three main situations:

1. Economic sectors where there is a stark power imbalance in which a private power dominates a class of people, such as employers wielding power over workers, landlords over tenants or health care companies over patients and health care workers.
2. When one or more demographic communities in the political jurisdiction—such as people of color, poor and working class people, young people or rural residents—face pernicious disparities and injustices as a result of policies and governance across multiple sectors.
3. There is broad but passive support on a given issue like climate action, expansion of Medicaid (public health insurance), abortion rights, gun control or paid sick leave, but policy solutions and government action are thwarted by strong, concentrated interests like corporate lobbies or ideological extremists.

Winning changes in any of these arenas is inherently difficult. Powerful economic interests who benefit from the status quo team up with racial, gender and sexual reactionaries to oppose fundamental changes in governance and policy that redistribute power, wealth and life chances to everyone. Winning requires a dual-power strategy combining the strengths of government with those of social movement organizations, and governing-power assemblies are one important tool that can be incorporated into a larger equitable dual-power, inside-outside strategy.



Deepening impact

Employing governing-power assemblies as part of a broader equitable governing-power approach to transforming governance helps increase assemblies' impact in a number of key ways.

How an equitable governing-power approach strengthens assemblies' impact:

1. Strategically engages frontline communities as participants who bring expertise on where and how governance is failing people and who have a direct stake in developing solutions that work for everyone.
2. Cultivates independent, organized civic power outside government that can counterbalance concentrated economic powers, strengthen the public's civic knowledge and muscles, and mobilize community members and build political will behind policy decisions and effective policy implementation.
3. Providing clear focal points in government and policy processes for movement organizations to focus their energies and power on, thereby increasing their influence and facilitating further organizing and power-building.
4. Institutionalizes assemblies throughout the policy process, beginning by helping set the policy agenda and continuing through designing and deciding on policies and conducting oversight to ensure government and private economic actors are implementing them effectively and equitably.

Governing-power assemblies are not the only model for structuring such inside-outside dual power, but because of their size and formalized structure, they are an important one. Other models like tripartite oversight or standards boards can also be effective co-governance tools for balancing power in specific economic sectors, and ballot initiatives can skirt legislative hurdles and enable the public to pass broadly popular policies like abortion rights and, in the U.S., Medicaid expansion. Civic assemblies—most notably Ireland's civic assembly on abortion—have also sometimes played a supportive role in building public support behind ballot initiatives.

Building political durability

In addition to helping drive real changes in policy and outcomes, an equitable power-building approach to governance can also help build the political durability of assemblies in two key ways. First, by deepening assemblies' impact, a power-building approach demonstrates assemblies' worth, which builds active support for assemblies both inside and outside of government and makes it harder for opponents to raise questions

about their worth. This helps normalize assemblies and establish them as broadly popular institutions, thereby helping them avoid being dismantled by future political administrations. Second, by actively engaging movement organizations as partners in designing and implementing assemblies, government leaders and staff and participatory democracy practitioners help establish an organized group of constituents inside and outside government who will champion assemblies.

In practice, assembly proponents may encounter at least four common scenarios where the capacity or political support needed to carry out assemblies is weak, but there are steps they can take to address them.

1 Political openness, but lack of know-how and capacity

One potential barrier to implementing assemblies and other collaborative governance mechanisms is a lack of experience and technical know-how among both government agencies and community organizations. Even when government is supportive of participatory governance and community priorities, either community organizations or government agencies and offices may lack trained staff, established processes and technical support to facilitate effective design and implementation of assemblies.

In these instances, assembly organizers can identify and reach out to experienced practitioners—both locally and from other regions—who can provide guidance and share best practices. They can also provide grants and contracts enable community organizations to engage and participate, create a steering committee to coordinate activities among all the community and government collaborator and develop trainings for both government staff and community leaders on how to approach co-governance and run assemblies. They can start by piloting smaller efforts to learn through the process and explore what additional funding, processes or technical support are needed over the longer term to build civic capacity.

2 Soft support

In many cases, politicians and government officials may express nominal support for assemblies but treat them as optional rather than essential to democracy and effective governance. While they may acknowledge the theoretical benefits of participatory democracy, officials often prioritize traditional representative institutions and bureaucratic decision-making as the core mechanisms of governance and sometimes chafe at any perceived diminishment of their own power. This attitude makes assemblies with government funding vulnerable to budget cuts, particularly in times of fiscal constraint, when funding is directed toward what are perceived as more

important public services. This produces a cycle in which participatory mechanisms remain underdeveloped, leading to limited visibility and impact, which in turn reinforces perceptions of their non-essential and non-effective status.

Assembly organizers can deepen political support for assemblies by building relationships with people in government (both assembly skeptics and supporters), listening to the skeptics' concerns, taking actions that address those concerns, co-strategizing with assembly supporters in government, bringing in stories and testimony of successful assemblies from other places and developing pilots to demonstrate proof of concept and showcase assemblies' impacts. For example, if people in government are hesitant about duplicating existing community engagement efforts, assembly proponents can map out those efforts and explore ways to align them with each other and with assemblies. Or if people aren't convinced that assemblies can improve policy effectiveness, they can bring forward examples like the Bronxwide Plan, Jackson People's Assembly and Porto Alegre participatory budgeting assemblies.

3 Reluctant accommodation

Sometimes government officials are resistant to participatory democracy, but are forced by outside pressure or mandates to implement it. They may have inherited assemblies from a prior administration or be given a mandate from higher authorities, or a newly insurgent pro-democracy movement may succeed in using electoral mandates, grassroots mobilization or legal strategies to force assemblies through. In these types of situations, reluctant officials are likely to minimally comply with requirements while restraining assemblies' influence and seeking ways to undercut them over time through defunding and bureaucratic roadblocks that prevent assemblies from exercising meaningful power. What's more, movements that win a big victory like instituting assemblies often struggle to pivot from campaigning to implementation. This can lead them to demobilize, removing the outside pressure needed to keep building public support for assemblies and to hold officials' feet to the fire.

In such environments, assemblies may operate initially as symbolic, tokenistic exercises that do not yet have genuine power in democratic decision-making. The challenge for assembly backers is to keep organizing political pressure to sustain assemblies through the next election cycle as they continue building support for bottom-up democracy over time. This requires a mix of inside and outside strategies. Inside strategies require outside organizers to work through government processes to try to sustain funding, block bureaucratic attacks and ideally find some allies in government who are willing to share information and co-strategize. Outside strategies include organizing a base of individuals and a coalition to keep up political pressure, and engaging in narrative strategies to

call out officials' intransigence and to hold them to account. This scenario often lasts until the next election when the election outcome either swings toward or against the party in power.

4 Outright opposition

Some governments actively resist participatory democracy, viewing assemblies as threats to their authority or as inefficient disruptions to centralized decision-making. This, for instance, was the case in Brazil when the Bolsonaro government eliminated or shrank a number of participatory processes that had been created by previous administrations. In such cases, officials may work to delegitimize assemblies by questioning their legitimacy, dismissing them as unrepresentative or framing them as obstacles to swift governance. They may also actively block their formation through legal restrictions, political maneuvering or defunding efforts. This opposition is often rooted in concerns that participatory mechanisms will sap political power-holders' own power, introduce unpredictability into policymaking, amplify oppositional voices or create gridlock. In highly resistant contexts, civic groups and activists advocating for assemblies may face not just institutional resistance but outright political hostility, requiring persistent advocacy and mobilization to overcome entrenched resistance.

These are difficult scenarios in which to push for assemblies with government support. In these instances, organizers can hold their own shadow assemblies to build communities' civic muscles and shame public officials, but they may also be better off deferring efforts to push assemblies in government and first organizing around other things. They can organize their base of members, find coalition partners and allies within government, work to change the public narrative around community leadership and democracy, use direct actions and other tactics to put pressure on government and get involved in electoral organizing to try to elect a better set of leaders in the next election.

Radical versus deliberative approaches

An equitable, power-building approach to assemblies and democracy-building is a *radical* democratic approach oriented toward transforming unjust systems, structures and power differentials.[4] "Radical," from the Latin *radix*, means getting to the root of things. This differs from a *deliberative democratic* approach, common among civic assemblies, that focuses on thoughtful discourse and deliberation among a representative body as a way to reach considered, rational policy decisions.[5] Deliberation is an essential tool and tactic within radical democratic practices, and civic assemblies and other deliberative democracy models deserve to play a significant ongoing role in policymaking. One-time civic assemblies are effective for working through political deadlocks involving competing values and multiple potential policy pathways and helping build public consensus behind a course of action. Standing civic assemblies hold particularly exciting possibilities, and should be much more widely implemented to introduce public priorities, input and oversight into legislative processes.

In the context of an unequal, unjust society in which governance is often dominated by concentrated political and economic powers, however, deliberation among a small number of individuals in civic assemblies cannot solve many of our thorniest political challenges. In many situations, in addition to reasoned deliberation, we also need social movements that can organize and mobilize poor people, people of color, women, LGBT+ people, workers, tenants, debtors, patients and others who are systematically disempowered by both public and private governance to wield the political and moral power needed expand our collective political imaginations and change what is politically possible. Thus whereas civic assemblies focus on curating a careful mix of participants and cultivating robust discourse between them, a governing-power approach looks beyond the individual participants in the assembly toward the goal of using the assembly as a tool for equitably organizing and mobilizing large numbers of community members to take collective political action. These two approaches both hold important value, but as we will see in the "Institutionalizing Assemblies in Movement-Building, Government and Policy Processes" section, are best suited to different circumstances.

In addition, a radical approach to governance does not take "public" vs. "private" and "political" vs. "economic" as fixed divides. Rather, it recognizes many of the decisions that employers, healthcare companies and other private actors make in society that impact people's lives as inherently political decisions that should be subject to democratic guidance and oversight. There is of course lots of room in democracy for families,

4 For more on power-building governance frameworks, see Harmony Goldberg and Dan McGrath from Grassroots Power Project on governing power, Manuel Pastor, Jennifer Ito and Madeline Wander from Equity Research Institute on community power-building, Rosa E. Gonzalez from Facilitating Power on the spectrum of community engagement to community ownership, K. Sabeel Rahman on governing to build power, Rahman and Hollie Russon Gilman on civic power, Jedediah Britton-Purdy, David Singh Grewal, Amy Kapczynski and Rahman on law and political economy, Archon Fung and Erik Olin Wright on empowered participatory governance, Wright on eroding capitalism, LeftRoots on liberatory strategy, Black Socialists in America and the Democratic Socialists of America's Libertarian Socialist Caucus on dual power and the Municipalism Learning Series and Fearless Cities on municipalism.

5 For more on the distinction between radical and deliberative approaches to civic assemblies, see Mads Ejsing's, Adam Veng's and Irina Papazu's "Green politics beyond the state: radicalizing the democratic potentials of climate citizens' assemblies," John Boswell's, Rikki Dean's and Graham Smith's "Integrating citizen deliberation into climate governance: Lessons on robust design from six climate assemblies," and Frederik Langkjær and Graham Smith's "Designing the Follow-Up to Climate Assemblies."

businesses, cultural communities, religious organizations and other collectivities to make independent decisions for themselves without any involvement by government. But when powerful actors like corporations make supposedly "private" decisions that create injustices or otherwise involve issues of public importance, we need ways to build public consensus, provide oversight and adjudicate disputes, all in order to protect people's fundamental human rights, dignity and material needs. Along with courts, regulatory agencies and legislation, collaborative governance offers a powerful set of tools for political and economic governance, and it provides important democratic accountability for both public and private power-holders. Collaborative governance can thus help us work across the artificial divide between government, the economy and civil society, building a democratic commons spanning all of these spaces.

Power-building versus reformist and separatist approaches

A power-building approach also differs from both reformist and separatist tendencies of some civil society and movement organizations.

In contrast to electoral organizing and policy advocacy, which aim to win reforms by influencing decisions by government power-holders, assemblies and other co-governance efforts aim to actually restructure who is part of public agenda-setting, decision-making and accountability processes, as well as whose policy needs are prioritized, what decisions get made and how effectively policies are implemented once they're passed.

Civic assemblies, meanwhile, bring direct public participation into public decision-making, but are often pursued with an orientation toward promoting rational deliberation among a small subset of people rather than addressing larger power imbalances in governance. In areas of governance in which there is relative equality among social groups, selecting assembly participants by sortition is an effective way to ensure diverse, broad-based policy input. But in policy arenas in which specific communities face heightened injustices and are sidelined from wealth and power (such as poor and working class people, people of color, young people, tenants, workers, patients or others), we need to give these communities disproportionately more participation and power in the policy process.

Governing power-assemblies thus serve an important complementary role to civic assemblies and other forms of civic republicanism and also to traditional modes of democratic participation like elections, interest-group advocacy and "civic engagement" efforts like surveys, public education, public meetings and public comment periods. Equitable power-building approaches like governing-power assemblies are needed to help counter top-down power of corporations and billionaires as well as exclusionary threats from the anti-democratic right.

For their part, people's movement assemblies are powerful, beautiful, necessary spaces for base-building organizations to recruit, organize and develop leaders and build relationships and alignment across people and organizations. But if movements want

to have a meaningful impact at scale, they have to work to build majoritarian power. At the same time as movements work to build autonomous community-owned institutions and community-controlled spaces, we also need arms of social movements that engage with government, policymaking and the unavoidable contradictions and compromises of governance in mass, pluralistic societies. Movement spaces including people's movement assemblies, policy-platform assemblies and member-governance assemblies will always have an important role in movement-building, but in order to mainstream and scale community visions, we also need governing-power assemblies that work in collaboration and productive tension with government. As imperfect as existing government institutions are, movements must strategically work with and through existing institutions even as they seek to transform them.

INSTITUTIONALIZING ASSEMBLIES IN MOVEMENT-BUILDING, GOVERNMENT AND POLICY PROCESSES

Multiple kinds of assemblies—including governing-power, civic and movement assemblies—have an important role to play in building a just, democratic society, but holding an assembly doesn't automatically guarantee it will change anything or become a permanent institution. We can deepen assemblies' impacts and their political durability through an equitable power-building approach by institutionalizing assemblies in government, in movement-building and in policymaking. We can think of this as three dimensions of institutionalization: integrating assemblies *horizontally* into community organizing and power-building by movement organizations, integrating them *vertically* into official governance processes and integrating them *longitudinally* over time throughout the entire cycle of policymaking and policy implementation.[6]

Over the longer term, institutionalizing assemblies should be aimed toward:

1. **Improving policy design, policy implementation and policy and government effectiveness**
2. **Institutionalizing assemblies** strategically in policy and governance processes
3. **Replicating and expanding assemblies** as a key mode of equitable democratic decision-making and accountability
4. **Cultivating robust social movements and civic capacity** outside of government
5. **Expanding equity, accountability and participation** in governance
6. **Resourcing assemblies** sufficiently, effectively and reliably
7. **Giving assemblies adequate powers and scope** to achieve a meaningful impact
8. **Deepening assemblies' impact** in equitable policy changes and real-world outcomes
9. **Strengthening relationships between government institutions and grassroots movements** to improve and sustain long-term participatory democracy

6 Ejsing, M., Veng, A. & Papazu, I. Green politics beyond the state: radicalizing the democratic potentials of climate citizens' assemblies. Climatic Change 176, 73 (2023). https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03550-z

Achieving these goals requires building mutual trust and strong working relationships between community and government.

Institutionalization in movement-building

Social movement organizations use people's movement assemblies, policy platform assemblies, member-governance assemblies, semi-spontaneous mass assemblies and shadow assemblies as powerful tools for building independent, democratic community power outside of government. Few models are as effective as movement assemblies at engaging a large number of organizations' members in directly governing their organizations and shaping their political agendas and strategies. Civic assemblies, in contrast, are often explicitly designed to sidestep interest-groups politics and depolarize political decisions, and they typically are not oriented toward significantly engaging and mobilizing the broader public as part of a popular political force capable of driving political action. But in arenas in which inequities and power differences come into play, community organization and mobilization is critical. There is thus an important opportunity for governments to support governing-power assemblies that forge direct connections with community organizations for the express purpose of facilitating community power-building.

Community-led power-building also flips the traditional mode of "community engagement" or "civic engagement" on its head. Instead of government conducting broad public outreach and then convening a participatory space for whoever happens to engage, community power-building organizations begin by clarifying their base of potential members who are directly impacted by injustices (home health care workers, Black neighborhood residents, public school students, etc.). They then identify which other organizations share values and strategic alignment, and design assemblies to organize their member base and strengthen interorganizational relationships and strategy. These assemblies are thus spaces that community has created or claimed rather than government-created spaces into which community is invited. Communities can either create their own independent movement assemblies or work with allies in government to co-design and co-create assemblies.

Community power-building organizations are member-based organizations that bring together individual community members from communities on the frontlines of injustice and coordinate political action among their members to advance justice for their communities and others. They play a key but so far underutilized role in co-governance. We absolutely need models like civic assemblies, participatory budgeting and ballot initiatives that invite people to engage as individual participants in democracy. But just as labor unions provide essential organization of workers and countervailing power to employers, community groups like tenant unions, student groups and environmental justice organizations can help structure civic organization and civic action among frontline communities who have limited power in elections and advocacy. We are, of course,

focusing on groups working toward an inclusive, equitable society; member-based groups organizing to exclude and suppress other communities of course have freedom of speech and freedom of association, but are not looking to collaborate with everyone to build collective solutions, so should not be centered in collaborative governance.

Professionals in government, the academy and professionalized nonprofits sometimes express concerns that cultivating organized constituencies outside of government is undemocratic because it amounts to picking favorites, and electeds may worry that newly organized constituencies may unsettle the balance of power among stakeholders that got them elected. The reality is that wealthy, powerful interests are already highly organized and wield major influence in government and governance, so for electeds and agencies to do nothing is, by default, to cede power to employers over workers, landlords over tenants, wealthier white communities over communities of color and to other power-holders over people who are getting the short end of the stick. By creating space for encouraging equitable community organization, capacity and power in communities that are under-organized relative to capital and corporations, government is investing in essential civic capacity and enabling a healthy, functional democracy.

Movements sometimes describe this as a "dual power" strategy. As the USC Equity Research Institute illustrates, by cultivating equity community power-building, government can help build stronger, more effective governance for everyone by helping catalyze, create and sustain a public agenda:

How community power catalyzes, creates, and sustains conditions for healthy communities

(by USC Equity Research Institute)

Set an Agenda

Community power builders catalyze conditions by setting an agenda for change:

- Bringing attention to issues and problems facing marginalized and historically disenfranchised communities
- Developing analyses of root causes that inform solutions to the problems
- Building momentum through collective action and catalytic campaigns

Achieve an Agenda

Community power builders create conditions by:

- Leveraging that momentum toward achieving an agenda
- Winning—or protecting—funding, programs and services
- Developing, passing, and enacting policies and establishing alternative models or programs

Govern an Agenda

Community power builders sustain conditions for healthy communities by governing an agenda:

- Developing leaders for key decision-making positions
- Building mutual accountability between decision-makers and communities
- Shifting the public discourse through narrative and culture-change work

In practice, power-holders never turn substantial power over to assemblies overnight. By first piloting assemblies on a smaller scale, government, community organizations and participatory democracy practitioners can learn through the process and make adjustments to strengthen and grow the assembly over time. This approach of piloting then scaling and institutionalizing assemblies and governance allows government and their community collaborators to strategically build out what K. Sabeel Rahman and Hollie Russon Gilman call "institutional hooks and levers" through which community groups can exercise influence, deepen their democratic capacity and create feedback loops "as constituencies exercise more power, and policymakers grow more accustomed to engaging with these groups."

In addition, and very importantly, progressively implementing and growing assembly over time enables government representatives and community leaders to do the essential work of building mutual understanding, trust and strong working relationships with each other—work that cannot wait, but also cannot be rushed. Organizers often talk about "moving at the speed of trust," and building trust takes time. And because of underinvestment in civic capacity and outright political attacks on labor unions, Black organizations and other civil society organizations, communities on the frontlines of injustice are often under-organized and under-resourced. Investing in assemblies and other co-governance models can help community organizations build and sustain their capacity by providing opportunities for them to develop their membership, staffing and knowledge.

Institutionalization in government

In addition to being integrated into social movements and community power-building, assemblies and other co-governance models should be strategically integrated into government and government processes including legislating, budgeting, administering public programs, rulemaking and regulation. This integration should be designed to give assemblies a meaningful role with sufficient power to actually shape policy decisions and policy outcomes.

For governments who want to focus on serving their constituents but already feel inundated by outside advocacy and procedural requirements, the idea of encouraging

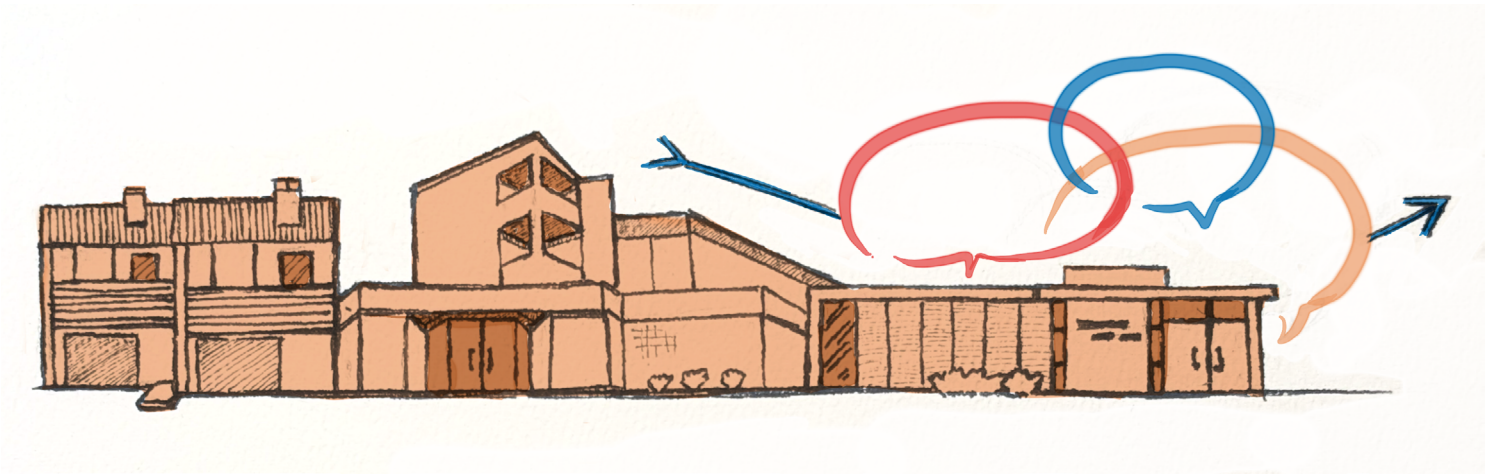
community power-building may feel intimidating, but in an uneven economy and political landscape, intentionally supporting organization among marginalized groups is essential. Community-power building will inevitably put outside pressure on governments at times, but organized communities working through democratic institutions can also help elected officials and public agencies in their work to improve policy design, build public agreement behind tough budget tradeoffs, improve public programs and regulatory governance, build a democratic counterweight to entrenched interest groups and help ensure that people see, feel and appreciate all the things that government does for them.

Benefits of institutionalizing assemblies in government and governance processes

For both government and movements, embedding assemblies in government and governance processes offers a number of benefits.

Institutionalizing assemblies in governance helps government:

- 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



Institutionalizing assemblies in governance helps community organizations and social movements:

- Wield power to shape policy decisions and outcomes
- Build knowledge, skills and capacity
- Grow membership bases, strengthen member and staff leadership, and strengthen coalitions
- Develop formal co-governance structures that institutionalize community power in government
- Develop interpersonal working relationships with government staff and elected officials
- Incentivize people to participate in assemblies by being able to clearly say how the assembly will influence decision-makers and policy
- Increase accountability in policy implementation to ensure policy wins are upheld and implemented effectively

Key considerations

When considering how to institutionalize assemblies within government and governance processes, key considerations and decisions may include:

1 **Community capacity and accountability**

Which communities are inequitably served by existing governance processes? Are there existing community organizations representing these constituencies, particularly groups that have direct lines of democratic accountability to the community through a membership structure? Do community groups need time and resources for further community organizing, fundraising, training and capacity-building or alignment-building across organizations before they can enter into co-governance processes on strong, independent footing?

2 **Relationships and trust**

How strong are existing relationships and trust between government and community organizations? How strong are relationships and communication across relevant parties within government and across relevant community organizations? Where do new relationships and deeper trust need to be built?

3 **Legislative or executive authorization**

Will the assembly be authorized by the legislature, an executive like a governor or mayor or a government agency? How will it be funded, which government bodies will it advise or report back to, and will it be codified in law?

4 **Powers and role in the policy process**

What powers and authority will the assembly be given? Which stage of budgeting, policymaking or policy implementation will the assembly intervene in? What pre-commitments will government make to respond to and act on the assembly's recommendations and decisions? What powers will the planning committee and assembly participants have to shape the assembly process? Who will define the core framing questions for the assembly to focus on? How will assemblies complement existing legislative, regulatory and program administration processes, and how will they build on existing community engagement efforts?

5 **Balancing political independence and policy impact**

How much autonomy is government willing to give the assembly planning team and the assembly participants to independently determine the goals, values, central framing question or core purpose, and process of the assembly? Will participants be able to shape their own learning, deliberation and decision-making process, request information from government, hear from speakers of their own choosing and independently author their own recommendations and final report? How do community organizations want to approach integrating the assembly into government in ways that increase its influence and power in policy decisions and policy implementation while still maintaining communities political independence and outside organizing? Can collaborators inside and outside government find common cause and co-strategize together through the many decision points they will face on how to strike this balance?

6 **Resourcing**

How much money, staffing and technical support needs to be allocated to the assembly for it to succeed, including for the pre-planning and follow-up phases before and after the assembly? Have specific government staff been designated to staff the assembly from pre-planning through execution and post-assembly follow up? Do they believe in the process, and do they have the funding, capacity, technical support and political backing they need to succeed?

7 **Political support**

How will elected officials voice and signal their support for the assembly process and the assembly recommendations to the public, to participants and to the government agencies? What kinds of community, labor, faith, small business or other coalition partners could help build political support?

Working through these and other questions requires convening key collaborators from inside and outside government to collectively clarify the purpose, goals and structure of the assembly and to plan around the key challenges of building relationships and trust, strategizing to achieve real impacts and establishing ongoing political support. Community and government collaborators' answers to these questions will vary based on their local circumstances. Our "Initiating Community-Government Collaboration" and "Key Steps to Plan and Run an Assembly" tools are designed to help.

Building foundational trust between government and communities

Building mutual trust between government and communities is one of the biggest challenges to successfully implementing and institutionalizing assemblies.

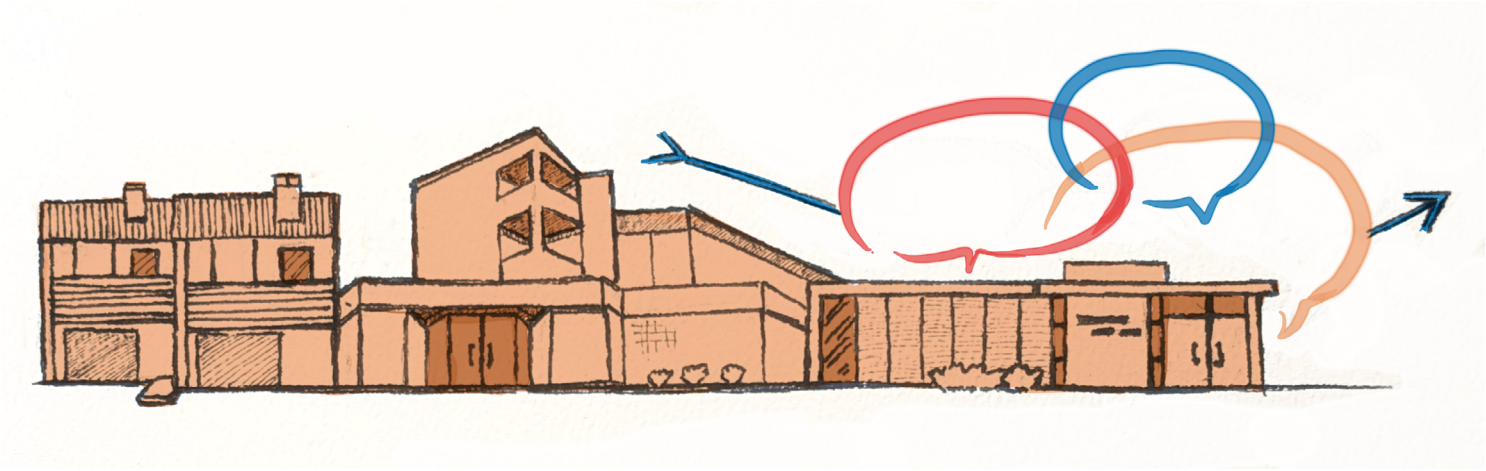
On the community side, public distrust in government is widespread in contemporary U.S. life. Public trust in government hovers around 20% in the U.S., and over 90% of people feel that it is important to improve the level of confidence that people have in one another. Many people, especially in communities that have faced generations of state violence, government neglect and false promises by politicians—including Black and Native people, undocumented immigrants, poor people and people without college degrees—understandably often hold deep distrust of government. Even people who recognize an important role for government and public policy may have engaged in participatory processes in the past that felt tokenistic and didn't change anything, and therefore may be skeptical that an assembly would be worth anyone's time. This can be true among staff and leaders at community organizations as well as would-be assembly participants from the general public. Building trust cannot happen overnight, but assemblies and other co-governance models that bring government and everyday people together into constructive, collaborative working relationships offer opportunities, if designed and executed thoughtfully, to begin to repair trust, relationships and democratic accountability.

In government, both elected officials and staff are likewise often skeptical that participatory governance can achieve enough to be worth the cost and effort. Some feel that a few loud voices dominate public forums and that the average member of the public either lacks enough information or is too single-minded to fully comprehend the issues and make the tough trade-offs needed in governance. In many cases, they feel that they already know from constituents and advocates what communities' policy priorities are, and they see political, procedural and budgetary barriers as the obstacles to progress, not

a lack of public participation. Government staff often feel that they are already immersed in lengthy public meetings, notice-and-comment and other participatory processes, and are wary that adding yet another layer of participation will change anything. Given assemblies' size and cost, they are especially wary that assemblies are worth the money and time.

Assemblies have the potential to help elected officials and government staff effect change by equitably involving a large number of directly impacted people (not just the highest-paid lobbyists or loudest voices) in ways that not only generate fresh policy insights, but also change what is politically possible. But building trust in these processes and in others involved takes time. Data and success stories from other assemblies and co-governance efforts can be convincing, but the most compelling way to get people in government fully on board with power-building approaches to co-governance is often to run pilots.

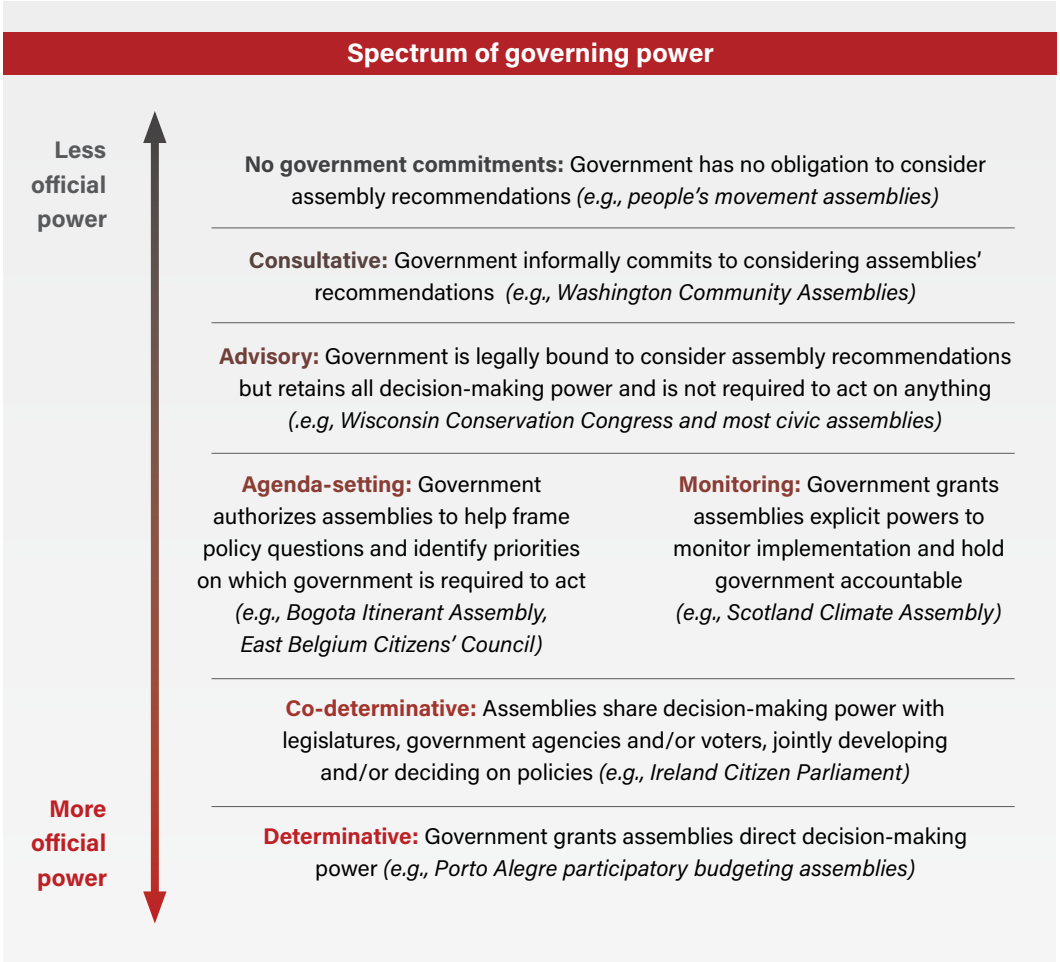
For community and government alike, collaboratively planning and running pilot assemblies and other co-governance efforts can be a tremendous way to build strong, active commitment to continue expanding and strengthening co-governance over time. It also creates a structured way in which collaborators can build interpersonal relationships and mutual trust, which are foundational to any successful collaboration. Our "Initiating Community-Government Collaboration" and "Key Steps to Plan and Run an Assembly" tools are designed to help.



Giving assemblies meaningful power

A key challenge for all assemblies—civic and movement assemblies included—is building their impact and durability. This takes time, and choosing to run an assembly is not a binary decision: there are myriad smaller decisions about the design, execution and institutionalization of an assembly that determine how much power and influence it has in governance.

As Rosa Gonzalez of Facilitating Power teaches us, it is helpful to think about co-governance efforts falling along a spectrum from tokenization and marginalization to community ownership and empowerment. Community and government collaborators' goal, over time, should be to try to move assemblies toward holding greater official power in governance. The following graphic is adapted from Gonzalez's Spectrum of Community Engagement to Ownership and Frederik Langkjær and Graham Smith's continuum between consultation and empowerment:



In their discussions together, it is helpful for community and government collaborators to honestly assess together where along the spectrum they think community engagement and collaborative governance efforts currently operate, and which points along the spectrum they would like to build towards over time.

It is important to note that this chart maps only one dimension of assemblies' power: powers that are specifically authorized by government. As we discuss below in the "Institutionalization in movement-building" section, governing-power assemblies also hold outside power arising not from government, but from the size, organization and mobilization of their base of community members. The Jackson People's Assembly, for example, has only had an informal commitment from government to consider and act on

its recommendations, but because of the number of people community organizations have brought into the assemblies, and those organizations' ability to elect their own candidates to the city council and mayor's office, the Jackson People's Assembly has wielded quite a bit of power.

Ways government can give assemblies independence

For community power-building organizations, there may be a tension between integrating assemblies into government to increase their policy impact while also maintaining their political autonomy and not getting too caught up in the demands of byzantine legislative and bureaucratic procedures. This tension will always be present with governing-power assemblies, and is something community organizations and their partners in government must work through. There are a number of concrete steps that governments convening assemblies can take to give assembly planners and participants political independence:

Establish planning and oversight committees:

1. Commission an independent steering committee of community stakeholders and participatory democracy practitioners to plan and oversee the assembly process.
2. Convene an independent content team of community stakeholders and issue experts to package the information and testimony that assembly participants receive.
3. Establish an independent community monitoring and oversight committee to oversee the assembly process.

Enable participants to shape the assembly:

4. Allow assembly participants to choose their own issues to focus on within the defined scope of the assembly.
5. Allow participants to determine their own learning process, including the ability to request information from government and to choose additional speakers they want to hear from.
6. For recurring assemblies, allow assemblies to establish their own governing body with the power to set the assembly's budget and establish the assembly's rules of operation.
7. Allow, encourage and train participants to speak openly to the media about the assembly.

Contract with independent organizations:

8. Contract with a participatory democracy organization that has experience designing and running assemblies to convene the steering committee and help design, plan and facilitate the whole assembly process.
9. Identify communities who are poorly represented in standard electoral and participatory processes, and provide grants or contracts to organizations in these communities to conduct targeted community outreach, recruitment and engagement.
10. Contract with outside evaluators to conduct an independent analysis of the assembly process and its outcomes.

Giving assemblies independence through these kinds of measures is essential for ensuring the integrity of deliberation within assemblies and for making sure that stakeholders and the broader public see assemblies as authentic, representative democratic spaces.

The roles of government staff and elected officials in assemblies

Collaborative governance is fundamentally about bringing community stakeholders together with government officials and staff to build working relationships and to co-create policies and governance processes that meet community needs and fulfill community values, visions and priorities. Even though government representatives are not participants in most assemblies, assemblies still have an opportunity to invite government representatives in to witness participatory democracy in action and warm to its potential role in governance, and to lend their political authority, knowledge and staff time to support the assembly process and the assembly's policy recommendations.

Ultimately, in governing-power assemblies held jointly by community and government, the ways that government staff and elected officials engage in assembly planning and assembly sessions must be decided on between community and government. Whether government representatives take a more active or supportive role, government representatives and community collaborators should strive for transparency, open communication and mutual understanding in their interactions together. They should also work to foster a culture of open collaboration and participant leadership in the assembly, and to balance the power dynamics that naturally exist between people in government and members of the public.

Government staff's roles

Government staff can be tasked with a range of responsibilities to support assemblies, often including:

- Pre-committing to publicly receiving and responding to the assembly's recommendations to their agency.
- Sitting on the planning committee alongside community stakeholders and participatory democracy excerpts to plan and execute the overall assembly process. Government staff can hold either a voting or a non-voting role in decision-making.
- Sitting on the content committee alongside community stakeholders and issue experts to help shape the testimony and information provided to assembly participants. This may include staff providing direct testimony to participants.
- Sharing expertise, data and information on the topics assemblies focus on, and providing strategic information and advice to community partners to help them build political support for assemblies and increase their impact.
- Convening a table bringing together staff from multiple agencies to collaborate with community organizations and participatory democracy practitioners around assemblies.
- Answering questions and responding to information requests from assembly planners and participants before, during and after the assembly.
- Providing financial and logistical support (where allowed under government rules) including helping secure funding and staff time for assemblies, providing in-kind support like meeting spaces, food and supplies and helping with recruitment, publicity and other operations.
- Attending assembly sessions as observers who are on hand to answer questions and build relationships but not to weigh in with opinions or engage in decision-making. Staff may sometimes be asked to step out of specific sessions to allow participants to deliberate privately.
- Providing feedback on the assembly's draft policy proposals to help assembly participants ensure their proposals do not duplicate existing laws and programs and that they are designed for successful real-world policy implementation
- Publicly receiving and responding to any policy, program or procedural recommendations made by the assembly to a specific government agency. Staff should acknowledge the assembly's work, identify any alignment between the recommendations and existing programs and regulations, identify how the agency will act on the recommendations and, if they have decided not to pursue any recommendations, provide a reason why not.
- In places where assemblies have been instituted as an annual process, attending the year's first assembly session to report on the government's progress in pursuing the assembly's recommendations from the prior year.

- Participating in an evaluation of the assembly process, including providing staffing and funding to support the process, collecting and coordinating input and, based on the results of the evaluation, facilitating improvements in future assembly processes and how they are institutionalized in government and the policy process.

To succeed in these roles, specific government staff need to be authorized to spend time working on the assembly, including through the pre-planning and follow-up phases before and after the assembly. And because many assemblies tackle issues that span the jurisdiction of multiple agencies, staff are often most successful when staff from multiple agencies have time committed to assemblies and are able to coordinate through an inter-agency working group.

To build truly collaborative community-governance relationships, it is helpful to work toward relationships in which government and community representatives work as true partners with strong trust and alignment. Having a staff presence at assemblies can help support the deliberative process and can also help build staff's understanding of and commitment to the assembly, which is critical to making sure staff are strong partners and advocates for continuing and expanding participatory democracy.

Elected officials' roles

Elected officials can be involved to varying degrees in assemblies. Their role can range from being full assembly participants with voting power to being nonvoting participants to simply presenting information, silently observing assembly sessions or being asked not to attend some assembly sessions at all. Specific roles may include:

- Pre-committing to publicly receiving and responding to the assembly's recommendations to the legislature.
- Speaking at the opening session to voice their support for the assembly and welcome participants. Where assemblies are an annual occurrence, elected officials can report back on their progress following through on the recommendations of the prior year's assembly.
- Helping publicize the assembly and building visibility and support for the process among the public and other lawmakers.
- Silently observing select assembly sessions to gain an understanding of the process and of community priorities.
- Participating in assembly discussions as non-voting participants.
- Participating in an assembly as a full voting participant alongside members of the public.
- Publicly receiving and responding to the assembly's recommendations by

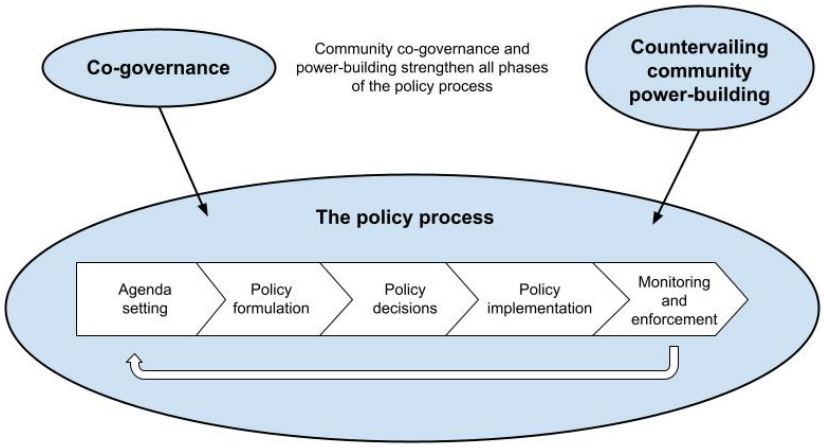
acknowledging the assembly's work and identifying which of the assembly's recommendations the legislature and government agencies will follow up on, what actions they will take, and, for any recommendations they have decided not to pursue, their justification.

Most assemblies do not involve elected officials in deliberations, but in select instances like in Ireland and Ostbelgien, Belgium, assemblies have been designed as collaborative legislative committees in which legislators and a select number of public participants deliberate together to identify policy priorities and co-create draft legislation to be voted on the larger legislature. Involving legislators as assembly participants involves important trade-offs for assembly planners to consider. On the one hand, it brings public authority to the assembly, builds legislators' understanding of and commitment to participatory democracy, and can generate policy recommendations that are directly responsive to the public while also designed to be able to pass the legislature and be implemented successfully. On the other, involving legislators as assembly participants can risk creating an unequal power dynamic between different kinds of assembly participants and can limit the political horizons of what assembly members consider and recommend.

- **Communicating clear roles and providing coaching**
  Given the authority that elected officials and even government staff carry, it is important for planners to clearly define their roles in the assembly and to communicate that to them and to participants. It is especially important to underline for participants that they are the decision-makers in the assembly, and that government representatives are there to listen and to support. It can also be helpful to emphasize with government representatives that where there is community distrust of or apathy about government, assemblies provide an opportunity to build trust and repair broken relationships—if they are intentionally designed and executed to do so. And because participatory governance is a muscle that everyone, both in government and in community, needs to exercise, it can sometimes be helpful to provide coaching or training to government representatives on how the assembly can help them in their work, and how they can engage appropriately in any assembly sessions they attend. Legislators are especially used to talking, so may need to be prompted to stay quiet and listen.

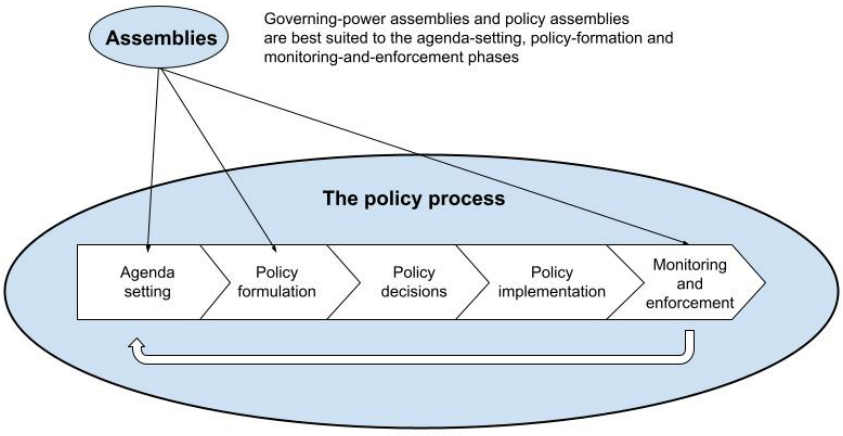
Institutionalization throughout the policy process

The policy process is often described in five stages: agenda setting, policy formulation, policy decisions, policy implementation and monitoring and evaluation. Every stage of the policy process can be made more effective and more equitable by incorporating community co-governance and by facilitating equitable, outside community power-building to enable marginalized and oppressed communities to wield countervailing power to corporations and other wealthy interests in the policy process and to help hold government accountable:



Movement assemblies are one important tool for community organizations to build countervailing outside power that they can bring to bear at any stage of the policy process. Policy-platform assemblies are usually intended to feed into the agenda-setting phase of the policy process, but they are part of an outside advocacy strategy without formal connections to government.

Meanwhile, governing-power assemblies and policy assemblies that are officially connected to government are generally best suited to intervening in the agenda-setting, policy formation and monitoring and evaluation phases of the policy process:



In the policy-decision phase, final decisions are usually delegated either to legislators or the voting public to ensure there is mass representation in decisions. In the policy implementation phase, in which government agencies are charged with implementing

administering public programs, rulemaking and regulation, smaller, more nimble co-governance models like community advisory committees are usually better suited to working with agencies on the complicated and evolving process of policy implementation, though government agencies sometimes choose to convene their own assemblies apart from the legislature.

Assemblies in agenda setting

Assemblies can be given authority not just to answer policy questions that are pre-determined by government, but also to select their own issues and frame their own questions for the assembly to address and for government to take action on. Giving assemblies agenda-setting power does not replace lawmakers' priorities, but complements them by creating space in which marginalized communities can self-identify important issues that are not being adequately addressed through existing policies and programs.

EXAMPLES

In Washington State's 2024 Community Assemblies, which worked within broad thematic parameters around environmental justice, poverty and racism, assembly participants spent their first session identifying a central challenge in their communities that they wanted the assembly to focus on, and then generated solutions in the following sessions.

In the Jackson People's Assembly in Jackson, Mississippi, participants over the years have focused on two ongoing challenges they wanted the city government to address: violence prevention and the city's ailing water infrastructure.

In Ostbelgien, Belgium, a lottery-selected Citizens' Council is authorized to select up to three priority issues each year, and to convene a separate lottery-selected Citizens' Panel to generate recommendations for lawmakers on the chosen issue.

Assemblies in policy formulation

Assemblies create space for people who are directly impacted by policies to learn about complex issues, weigh multiple values and considerations, bring their direct personal experiences to bear, and collectively work to generate, shape and prioritize possible solutions.

EXAMPLES

Across the U.S., **participatory budgeting assemblies** invite participants to develop budget proposals for public spending. Proposals are voted on by residents of the district or municipality.

Under state law, **Wisconsin's Conservation Congress** is authorized to develop policy recommendations for the Department of Natural Resources. The recommendations are decided on by the Department's appointed governing board.

In Jackson, Mississippi, assembly participants worked with friendly city council members and a friendly mayor to co-design a sales tax increase to help fund repairs to the city's water system. Since the assembly helped build public support behind the tax increase and worked with lawmakers to make sure it was well designed, the city council passed the tax increase.

In British Columbia's 2004 civic assembly, participants created a proposal to replace the province's first-past-the-post voting system with a single-transferable-vote system. Their proposal was put before voters in a public referendum. The referendum won a majority of votes, 58%, but narrowly missed the 60% supermajority required for the referendum to be passed into law.

Brussels' Deliberative Committees are made up of 15 members of parliament and 45 lottery-selected members of the public who deliberate together to develop recommendations for parliament on a defined policy issue. Parliament is required to officially receive the recommendations, decide what to take action on and deliver an official response back to the Deliberative Committee explaining which recommendations they did and did not take action on and justifying their decisions.

Assemblies in policy decisions

As mentioned, assemblies are not usually authorized to make final, binding policy decisions. Decision-making is instead typically delegated to elected officials or to the voting public (through a ballot measure) to try to ensure broad-based representation in decision-making. That said, there are a few exceptions in which assemblies are given direct decision-making power in policy, usually in smaller jurisdictions like neighborhoods or towns. Assemblies that invite all residents of a jurisdiction to attend, like neighborhood assemblies and New England town meetings, sometimes give attendees direct voting power.

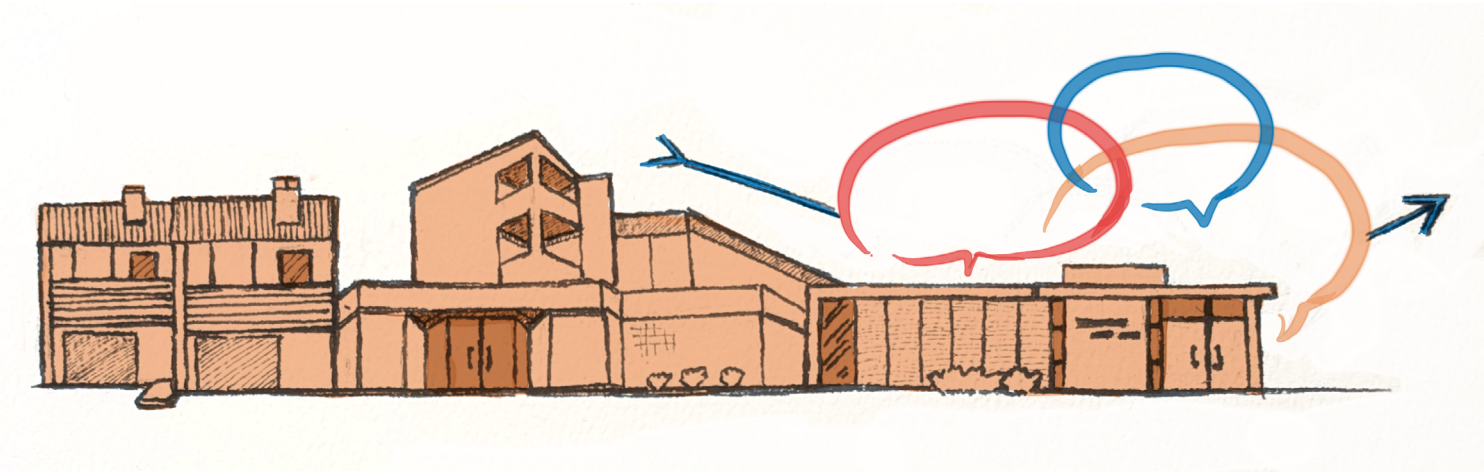
EXAMPLES

Open-attendance New England town meetings and some neighborhood assemblies invite all residents to attend, and sometimes put votes on policy and budget decisions directly to attendees.

In Gdańsk, Poland, the former mayor took the unusual step of pre-committing the city to enact any assembly proposals that were supported by over 80% of assembly participants. The city convened three lottery-selected civic assemblies in 2016 and 2017 (focused on flood prevention, air pollution and citizen engagement and the treatment of LGBT people), and followed through on participants' recommendations.

Assemblies in policy implementation

Once policies are decided on, public agencies need to be allowed to implement their directives to run public programs and regulate private actors. There is a real need for greater community participation in policy implementation, but given their large size, assemblies are usually not the best co-governance model to conduct back-and-forth work with agency staff. There are a number of cases however in which government agencies, rather than elected officials, have decided to convene assemblies to engage the public, inform their operations and help hold them accountable.



EXAMPLES

Although participatory budgeting processes are most often convened by legislators, public agencies including **New York City's Civic Engagement Commission** and **school districts**, including a number in Arizona, have convened participatory budgeting processes to enable assemblies to make proposals for how to spend a portion of the agencies' budgets.

The predecessor to Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources first convened the **Wisconsin Conservation Congress** in 1937. The Congress makes policy recommendations to the department, and Congress delegates also have reserved seats on several of the departments' advisory committees.

In the mid-2010s, Toronto's City Planning Division and Metrolinx (the metro region's transit agency) both convened civic juries to advise their agencies. The Toronto Planning Review Panel advised the City Planning Division on major development projects, and the Metrolinx Regional Residents' Reference Panel advised Metrolinx on transportation investments.

Assemblies in monitoring and enforcement

There is no way to implement policy effectively and equitably without providing channels for structured feedback from people who are directly impacted by policies. There is thus tremendous potential—so far largely underexplored—to increase equitable public participation in monitoring, oversight and enforcement. Assemblies, as well as smaller co-governance bodies like standards board and oversight committees, can help conduct monitoring and provide feedback to help ensure that policy is implemented effectively, and can help hold both government and private economic actors accountable.

EXAMPLES

Assemblies that have been institutionalized as annual processes in governance, including **Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting assemblies** in the 1990s and early 2000s and the **Brussels**, **Ostbelgien** and **Paris** civic assemblies today, require government representatives to report back at the start of each assembly on their progress in implementing the assemblies' recommendations from the prior year.

CONCLUSION

Growing momentum

Elections and representative governance are cornerstones of democracy, but are incapable of meeting this century's great challenges on their own. The shrinking sphere of democratic control, unaffordable cost of living, economic precarity, racial and economic inequity, climate change, widespread distrust in government and institutions, and right-wing White Christian nationalism are all immense challenges that cannot be solved solely through top-down decisions or politics as usual. They are multifaceted societal challenges that can only be addressed through the combined powers of governments and social movements. Assemblies are one of the best tools we have for structuring community collaboration in governance, and their momentum is growing.

In 2024 in the U.S., Southern Movement Assembly held a Summer of Assemblies across the South, and organizers in Los Angeles, Aurora, Illinois, and other cities held people's movement assemblies. Meanwhile, Healthy Democracy, the Central Oregon Civic Action Project, the Center for Public Deliberation, Civic Lex and other organizations have launched new civic assemblies in Deschutes County, Oregon, Fort Collins, Colorado, and Lexington, Kentucky. Internationally, there are many recent examples of assemblies including civic assemblies in Bogota, Brussels, East Belgium, Paris, Melbourne and other cities and jurisdictions, burgeoning assembly efforts in Hull, England, and across the UK and inspiring large-scale examples of governing assemblies in Kurdistan, Armenia and Brazil, among other places. Foundations and governments can follow their lead by further funding assembly efforts and the institutional training, capacity-building, technical support and research needed to pull assemblies off, scale them and replicate them effectively.

Meanwhile, Washington State took a big step in 2024 by becoming the first U.S. state to pilot what it calls "community assemblies" across the state that center the participation and leadership of communities on the frontlines of poverty, racism and environmental injustice. With a $2 million allocation from the state legislature, the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) contracted with Just Futures, a coalition of environmental justice, anti-poverty and community-wealth-building organizations with whom the Department had years-long working relationships, to plan and carry out the assemblies. Just Futures brought in another six community-based organizations to design, select participants for, facilitate and run six separate assemblies. Involving these community organizations rooted in working-class Latine, Black, Pacific Islander and other communities on the frontlines of injustice and giving them authentic leadership in the assembly process was innovative. Since this is the first time the community assemblies have been piloted, it remains to be seen exactly what kind of policy recommendations

and working relationships with public agencies will come out of the assemblies, but this is exactly the kind of bold exercise in equitable, participatory democracy that is needed much more widely.

There is great potential to continue to employ and expand movement and civic assemblies around the United States and in other countries, and especially to further experiment with governing-power assemblies that combine civic assemblies' role in public governance with movement assemblies' community power-building.

Recommendations

In closing, we share six key ways that that governments, philanthropy, community organizations, researchers and participatory democracy practitioners can deepen the impact and durability of assemblies and scale them much more widely in movements and governance:

1 Centering equity and power

In a truly egalitarian society, broad public input and sortition would be sufficient to uphold democracy on their own, but that is not the world we live in. Public policy and governance have inequitably distributed wealth and economic and political power across racial, economic and social groups. Realizing justice and democracy therefore requires repairing past and ongoing harms, assessing equity in both governance processes and outcomes, centering the needs and leadership of people on the frontlines of justice and orienting governance toward equitable solutions that work for everyone by focusing especially on the needs of people on the bottom and at the margins.

2 Piloting and evaluation

Participatory budgeting began as an effort in a single city—Porto Alegre, Brazil—and has since been adopted around the world. In the U.S., participatory budgeting was first adopted in a single ward in Chicago, and has since spread across the country. The Jackson People's Assembly has inspired the launch of assemblies in places as far afield as Los Angeles and Hull, England. Every assembly holds lessons and inspiration for all that follow. Each of these efforts has been iterative as organizers have learned what worked well and what did not, and made adjustments from year to year. We need to pilot assemblies much more widely, evaluate these processes and document and share lessons and best practices to better enable everyone to experiment, learn and develop more effective assemblies.

3 Institutionalizing

Movement assemblies have been institutionalizing assemblies within broader movement-building for years, and in recent years civic assembly practitioners especially in Latin America and Europe have made great strides toward integrating civic assemblies into legislative governance. We need more movement and civic assemblies, and especially more efforts to institutionalize 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 Resourcing

Both governments and philanthropy have an important role to play in funding assemblies. This includes funding assembly processes and supports like stipends and childcare that low-income people need to be able to participate. It also includes long-term, recurring funding for the civic capacity needed for assemblies, participatory governance and democracy to succeed. Assembly practitioners consistently identify the need for more funding for community organizing, organizational development, public education and engagement, network-building, capacity-building, trainings for both community members and government staff and anchor institutions and resource hubs. The Washington State legislature's $2 million commitment to community assemblies and grants for the Deschutes County civic assembly from Ford Family Foundation, Brooks Resources, Omidyar Network, Porticus, Quadrivium and the Rockefeller Foundation are great models for other governments and foundations.

5 Capacity building

It takes significant knowledge, skills, staff or volunteer time, money and inter-institutional coordination to successfully run an assembly, and also to successfully integrate it into movement-building, government and the policy process. Both community organizations and their partners in government need capacity-building support in the form of funding, personnel, training, and tools. To a large degree, this is a matter of strengthening existing organizations' and public agencies' capacity, but there are also some institutional gaps that may require new institutions. Individual public agencies can allocate staff time and funding to support assemblies and align them with other co-governance efforts, and elected officials can found new government offices like the New York City Mayor's Public Engagement Unit to help coordinate and support co-governance efforts across government. Philanthropy can fund nonprofit community capacity-building institutes to help grow civic capacity and community power

through training, tools, grants, research, documentation, civic participation schools, communities of practice and other forms of support.

6 Building networks and sharing lessons

Community organizers, legislators and government staff interested in assemblies are hungry for case studies, models, best practices and direct learning exchanges with people who have already carried out assemblies. We hope this report helps contribute, but we still need much more documentation, network-work building, learning exchanges and communities of practice in the years to come.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report is based entirely on the wisdom and experience of community organizers, assembly participants, researchers, practitioners and others who have been directly involved in assemblies. I extend my gratitude to all of them, and especially to Just Futures and the community anchor organizations who led Washington State's Community Assemblies, from whom I learned enormously.

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GLOSSARY

Assemblies are a participatory governance tool in which large numbers of people come together to deliberate and make collective decisions.

Collaborative governance or co-governance is a collection of participatory models and practices in which government and communities share power by working together through formal and informal structures to make collective policy decisions, co-create programs to meet community needs, and ensure those policies and programs are implemented effectively.

Community is a group of people sharing something in common. A community can be either an **economic group** or **interest group** who are stakeholders with similar needs and interests within a given economic system like employment, health care, housing, education, environmental stewardship or public welfare programs, or a **social group** or **identity group** who share a racial, gender, national or another cultural identity. Both interest-base and identity-based communities may be defined by geography, but may also span political jurisdictions. **Frontline communities** are communities at the intersection of interest and identity who, because of their identities, have faced unique, discriminatory limits on their political power and barriers to the fulfillment of their human rights within economic systems. In democracy, communities can act together either as a loose collection of individuals such as voters or as organized stakeholder groups like labor unions. We call these organized stakeholder groups **community organizations** and highlight the particularly important role of member-based **community power-building organizations.**

Community power-building organizations are member-based organizations who bring together individual community members from communities on the frontlines of injustice, and coordinate political action among their members to advance justice for themselves and others.

Equitable, power-building co-governance creates space for groups of people who are marginalized and poorly served by traditional modes of governance to directly participate in policymaking and policy implementation. It enters equity in both governance processes and policy outcomes, and works to cultivate countervailing power among these communities both inside and outside government.

Federated assemblies or **civic congresses** are mass governance structures in which smaller assemblies with broad participation feed delegates and input into a larger organization-wide or region-wide assembly in which delegates make decisions on behalf of all of the assemblies. Movement assemblies, policy assemblies and governing-power assemblies can all be federated.

Governance is the process of governing society, and includes both **public governance** by government and **private governance** by organizations and institutions like companies, professional associations and religious groups.

Governing-power assemblies are assemblies that are connected through formal structures or informal working relationships to government and the policy process and 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.

Movement assemblies are assemblies that are wholly controlled by social-movement organizations with no official involvement or recognition by government. There are at least four prevalent forms.

- **People's movement assemblies** are organizing vehicles that are designed as a process and space through which one or more organizations' membership bases come together for political education, leadership development and community building toward some form of collective action. This can influence government and policy from the outside, but movement assemblies do not have formal ties to government.
- **Policy-platform assemblies** are movement assemblies convened by one or more organizations for attendees to develop and ratify a joint policy platform.
- **Member-governance assemblies** are an ongoing, institutionalized part of some member-based organizations', coalitions', unions' and political parties' internal governance process in which members are asked to elect leaders and vote on resolutions, policy platforms, and other internal questions.
- **Semi-spontaneous mass assemblies** emerge in moments of political crisis and rupture when large numbers of people pour into the streets and come together to form new collective political spaces.
- **Shadow assemblies** are designed to parallel and contrast with official top-down policymaking when government refuses to bring people into the official policymaking process.

Policy assemblies can be commissioned by either governments or by non-governmental organizations to give participants space for independent deliberation to work through a "wicked" policy challenge together and propose solutions. In contrast to movement assemblies, they hold at least some degree of official recognition by governments as playing a role in the policy process and have a primary focus on creating a space for participatory, deliberative policymaking (as opposed to movement assemblies' primary focus on building independent, extra-governmental people power). Policy assemblies vary in how they select assembly participants, in which kinds of community organizations or professional consultants design and run the assemblies, in how much the government

defines the purpose and parameters of the assembly and in whether the assembly holds advisory or decision-making in policymaking. They include:

- **One-time civic assemblies,**[1] which are lottery-selected assemblies convened to provide input on a single policy question and then disbanded. They almost always hold advisory power, with final decisions made by elected officials or voters.
- **Standing civic assemblies**, which are institutionalized annual lottery-selected assemblies that are officially recognized by the government as playing an ongoing role in public governance, usually to identify priority issues for legislators or public agencies, to put proposed policies in front of legislators or voters or to conduct oversight and monitoring of government.
- **Constituent assemblies**, which are assemblies that are open to all residents or stakeholders of a defined geographic area, and at which attendees are authorized to make one or more policy or procedural decisions.
- **Constitutional assemblies**, which are public bodies of elected or appointed representatives who come together to draft or revise a national, state or municipal constitution or charter, either as part of regular constitutional maintenance (as in U.S. states) or in moments of major national crisis and transition.

Wicked problems are complex, multifaceted challenges without a single clear solution. They impact multiple stakeholders, involve multiple values, considerations and viewpoints, and necessitate tradeoffs.

1 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 polity and from civil and human rights, we use the term "civic assembly."

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