FEDERAL UNIVERSITY OF MINAS GERAIS
Philosophy and Human Sciences Faculty
Graduate Program in Political Science

LUCAS HENRIQUE NIGRI VELOSO

DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS, VITAL EXPERIENCES AND VULNERABILITIES: THE GLOBAL CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON THE CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Belo Horizonte

2024

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DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS, VITAL EXPERIENCES AND VULNERABILITIES: THE GLOBAL CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY ON THE CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

Thesis presented to the Graduate Program in Political Science at the Federal University of Minas Gerais as a partial requirement for obtaining the Ph.D. title in Political Science.

Research Area: Participation, Social Movements, and Democratic Innovations.

Advisor: Prof. Dr. Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça
Co-Advisor: Prof. Dr. Nicole Curato

Belo Horizonte

2024

320 V443d 2024	Veloso, Lucas Henrique Nigri. Democratic innovations, vital experiences and vulnerabilities [manuscrito] : the global citizens' assembly on the climate and ecological crisis / Lucas Henrique Nigri Veloso. - 2024. 288 f. : il. Orientador: Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça. Coorientadora: Nicole Curato. Tese (doutorado) - Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Faculdade de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas. Inclui bibliografia 1. Ciência política – Teses. 2. Democracia - Teses. 3. Mudanças climáticas – Teses. 4. Meio ambiente – Teses. I. Mendonça, Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça. II. Curato, Nicole. III. Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais. Faculdade de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas. IV. Título.

Ficha catalográfica elaborada por Vilma Carvalho de Souza - Bibliotecária - CRB-6/1390

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE MINAS GERAIS

ATA

FAFICH - COLEGIADO DE PÓS-GRADUAÇÃO EM CIÊNCIA POLÍTICA - SECRETARIA

ATA 18ª/2024 DA DEFESA DA TESE DO ALUNO LUCAS HENRIQUE NIGRI VELOSO

Realizou-se, no dia 23 de setembro de 2024, às 14:00 horas, por videoconferência, a defesa da tese, intitulada "Democratic innovations, vital experiences and vulnerabilities: the Global Citizens' Assembly on the climate and ecological crisis", elaborada e apresentada por LUCAS HENRIQUE NIGRI VELOSO - número de registro 2020684769, graduado no curso de CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS. A defesa é requisito parcial para a obtenção do grau de Doutor em CIÊNCIA POLÍTICA, e foi submetida e analisada pela seguinte Comissão Examinadora: Prof. Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça - Orientador (DCP/UFMG), Profa. Nicole Curato - Coorientadora (University of Canberra), Profa. Anna Drake (University of Waterloo), Profa. Sonia Bussu (University of Birmingham), Profa. Claudia Feres Faria (DCP/UFMG), Prof. Filipe Mendes Motta (UFMG). A Comissão considerou a tese APROVADA. Finalizados os trabalhos, lavrei a presente ata que, lida e aprovada, vai assinada eletronicamente pelos membros da Comissão. Belo Horizonte, 23 de setembro de 2024.

Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Filipe Mendes Motta**, **Usuário Externo**, em 25/09/2024, às 09:47, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020.

Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Anna Marie Drake**, **Usuária Externa**, em 25/09/2024, às 14:26, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020.

Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Ricardo Fabrino Mendonca**, **Professor do Magistério Superior**, em 25/09/2024, às 16:14, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020.

Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Claudia Feres Faria**, **Chefe de departamento**, em 25/09/2024, às 17:26, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020.

Documento assinado eletronicamente por **Sonia Bussu**, **Usuário Externo**, em 26/09/2024, às 03:41, conforme horário oficial de Brasília, com fundamento no art. 5º do Decreto nº 10.543, de 13 de novembro de 2020.

To all those who, driven by a democratic ideal, remain steadfast in their quest for a more just, caring, and flourishing world.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If there's one thing I've learned and empirically attested to during my academic journey in the human sciences, it's that who we are and what we do are largely shaped by the networks of people and beings we're connected to.

Among the many networks that made this thesis possible, I must first thank the incredible participants, organizers, and collaborators of the Global Assembly. Meeting, interacting with, and learning from you has shaped my academic journey and deepened my understanding of democratic participation and the environment. Your efforts and commitment to driving change—globally and at the micropolitical level—have been truly inspiring. Thank you for your dedication to addressing our climate and environmental crises.

Closely connected to the networks of the Global Assembly, I must extend my heartfelt thanks to the entire group of researchers involved in the study and evaluation of this democratic innovation. Being part of this remarkable endeavor gave me the privilege of working with the brilliant Nicole Curato, my co-supervisor, who believed in me from our first conversation. Nicole has taught me so much—not just in theory, research, and writing but also in introducing me to a world of gin flavors I never knew existed. I am also deeply grateful to the entire evaluation team, especially Melisa Ross and Azucena Moran, with whom I had the opportunity to work closely and who enriched this project in countless ways.

Speaking of the international networks of people who have supported, inspired, and cared for me, I must express my deep gratitude to the incredible Centre for Deliberative Democracy and Global Governance (CDDGG) at the University of Canberra. First, I want to acknowledge the brilliant researcher and dear friend Hans Asenbaum, who connected me with Nicole, engaged in philosophical discussions, and shared great moments across at least three continents. At the Centre, I am especially thankful to the wonderful PhD students—Wendy Conway-Lamb, Friedel Marquardt, Mohammad Abdul-Hwas, Sahana Sehgal, and Anne Jedzini—for making me feel welcomed and motivated. I also extend my thanks to the stellar team of professors: John Dryzek, Selen Ercan, Simon Niemeyer, Jonathan Pickering, Adele Webb, Jean-Paul Gagnon, and Jordan McSwiney, for the many stimulating debates and friendly gatherings. A special mention goes to my dear friends, Olive Mendonza, a brilliant PhD candidate at CDDGG, Ferdinand Sanchez, and Emerson Sanchez, with whom I share an inexplicable and beautiful connection.

Turning to the central network of my academic life, I must acknowledge the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), where I have thrived for over a decade. My dear advisor, Professor Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça, is at the heart of my doctoral journey. My admiration for

Ricardo began during my undergraduate studies in Social Sciences, where I witnessed his brilliance as a professor and his unwavering dedication to his students. Through my longtime mentor and advisor, Professor Ângela Marques—whose ideas are deeply woven into this thesis—I became part of the Margem Research Group in Democracy and Justice, further strengthening my connection with Ricardo. When I approached him to be my PhD advisor just before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, he welcomed me wholeheartedly, nurtured my growth, sharpened my skills, and provided countless opportunities, many of which I could never fully list. Reflecting on his career, his commitment, and the passion he brings to his work, I realize how much I still have to learn and grow to follow his example.

I am deeply grateful to the Margem Research Group and the colleagues with whom I have shared so much—discussions, debates, and moments of joy—including Matheus Canela, Gabrielle Marques, Victória Lima, Marina Paixão, Caio Santos, Andressa Michelotti, Letícia Domingues, Renato Duarte, and Professors Camilo Aggio, Cristiano Rodrigues, and Rayza Sarmento. A special mention goes to my brilliant friends and researchers, Bruno Guimarães and Professor Filipe Motta.

Naming all the students and professors at UFMG who have shaped my journey would be impossible, so I want to highlight those who have stood by me in this challenging chapter. First, my “Periféricas +” companions, who were by my side even before the PhD journey: Paula Dornelas, Pedro Barbabela, Yulieth Martínez, and Pollyanna Dos Santos. And, of course, my new friends who have been part of this path: Natália Martino, Carla Beatriz, Luiz Silva, Fanny Mencato, and Lucas Ribeiro. A special thanks to Carla Silva for reigniting my passion for political philosophy time and again when the flame had dimmed.

I must also express my deep gratitude to the network of support and sustenance that has carried me: my family and friends, whether with me in body or spirit. My heartfelt thanks go to my beloved grandfather, Amadeu Nigri, for being my haven and life example. I am also deeply grateful to my mother and brother, Eliane Nigri and Flávio Nigri, and my aunt, cousins, nieces, and nephews. I must express my love and admiration for my invaluable partner, lover, and friend through countless wonderful and challenging moments, Ana Luisa Jorge Martins and her incredible parents, Antônio Martins and Alzira Jorge. Lastly, I want to acknowledge all my lifelong friends, especially those from UFMG, CEFET-MG, and the Spiritualist Centers and “Terreiros” I am part of, for their care and for always keeping my faith strong.

“We are constantly warned about the consequences of the recent choices we have made. If we can pay attention to a vision that escapes the blindness we are experiencing worldwide, it might open our minds to some form of cooperation among peoples, not to save others, but to save ourselves." (Ailton Krenak, 2020, Ideas to Postpone the End of the World).

“Democracy, as compared with other ways of life, is the sole way of living which beliefs wholeheartedly in the process of experience as an end and as means (…) and which releases emotions, needs, and desires so as to call into being the things that have not existed in the past.” (John Dewey, Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us, 1939)

RESUMO

Como o design de inovações democráticas interage com as vulnerabilidades sociopolíticas dos cidadãos participantes, possibilitando e constrangendo suas oportunidades de vivenciar processos democráticos transformadores?

Esta tese investiga como a pioneira *Global Citizens' Assembly* sobre a Crise Climática e Ecológica (GA), realizada em 2021 no meio digital, permitiu que pessoas comuns ao redor do mundo aprendessem e deliberassem sobre um tema complexo, vivenciando experiências democráticas transformadoras que culminaram na apresentação de uma declaração cidadã na COP-26, em Glasgow. Ao mesmo tempo, analisa as assimetrias e desvantagens participativas, bem como as resiliências ou "response-abilities" desenvolvidas pelos cidadãos para permanecerem engajados ao longo da intensa jornada da GA, que contou com 68 horas de interação deliberativa ao longo de três meses.

O desenho de pesquisa desta tese foi desenvolvido por meio de uma combinação da teoria das democracias criativas de John Dewey, das teorias feministas das vulnerabilidades e das inovações democráticas. Metodologicamente, a tese utiliza as abordagens Normativa e Experiencial da *Grounded Theory* para reconstruir e analisar qualitativamente experiências transformadoras e vulnerabilidades cidadãs relatadas em distintas fontes de dados, como registros etnográficos, documentos oficiais e entrevistas em profundidade com participantes e organizadores da GA.

A análise baseada na *Grounded Theory* identificou e analisou três principais conjuntos de experiências democráticas transformadoras: a) Mudanças positivas nas identidades políticas dos sujeitos de pesquisa, impulsionadas pelas condições de aparecimento e reconhecimento democrático proporcionadas pela GA; b) Expansão das mentalidades e compreensões sobre a crise climática, resultante do aprendizado nas interações digitais da GA e nos ambientes cotidianos em que os cidadãos se preparavam para os eventos; c) Desenvolvimento de "reflexividade empática" e senso de competência política, fomentado pelas condições do processo deliberativo e pela co-construção de uma declaração cidadã. As evidências indicam que essas experiências transbordaram ("spill-over") e modificaram comportamento e relações políticas e ecológicas dos indivíduos após o evento.

A tese conclui que a GA foi bem-sucedida ao promover um processo participativo global, inclusivo e transformador. Contudo, a interação entre seu desenho institucional e fatores contextuais, individuais e intersubjetivos gerou desvantagens participativas assimétricas entre cidadãos. Uma abordagem "ecológica" da política, que considera a contextualidade e a interseccionalidade das vulnerabilidades cidadãs, mostra-se essencial tanto para mitigar esses desafios quanto para compreender e potencializar efeitos de transbordamento sobre indivíduos e democracias.

Palavras-chave: Democracia Deliberativa, Inovações Democráticas, Transformações Democráticas, Assembleias de Cidadãos, Vulnerabilidades.

ABSTRACT

How does the design of democratic innovations interact with the sociopolitical vulnerabilities of participating citizens, enabling and constraining their opportunities to experience transformative democratic processes?

This thesis investigates how the pioneering Global Citizens' Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis (GA), held digitally in 2021, allowed ordinary people around the world to learn and deliberate on a complex topic, experiencing transformative democratic processes that culminated in the presentation of a citizen declaration at COP-26 in Glasgow. At the same time, it analyzes participatory asymmetries and disadvantages, as well as the resilience or "response-abilities" developed by citizens to remain engaged throughout the intense journey of the GA.

The research design of this thesis was developed through a combination of John Dewey's theory of creative democracies, feminist theories of vulnerabilities, and democratic innovations. Methodologically, the thesis employs the Normative and Experiential approaches of *Grounded Theory* to reconstruct and qualitatively analyze transformative experiences and citizen vulnerabilities reported in various data sources, including ethnographic records, official documents, and in-depth interviews with GA participants and organizers.

The Grounded Theory-based analysis identified and examined three main sets of transformative democratic experiences: a) Positive changes in the political identities of research subjects, driven by the conditions of democratic appearance and recognition provided by the GA; b) Expansion of mindsets and understandings of the climate crisis, resulting from learning in digital interactions within the GA and in the everyday environments where citizens prepared for the events; c) Development of "empathetic reflexivity" and a sense of political competence, fostered by the conditions of the deliberative process and the co-construction of a citizen declaration. The evidence indicates that these experiences spilled over and influenced individuals' political and ecological behavior and relationships after the event.

The thesis concludes that the GA was successful in fostering a global, inclusive, and transformative participatory process. However, the interaction between its institutional design and contextual, individual, and intersubjective factors generated asymmetrical participatory disadvantages among citizens. An "ecological" approach to politics, which considers the contextuality and intersectionality of citizens' vulnerabilities, proves essential both for mitigating these challenges and for understanding and enhancing spillover effects.

Keywords: Deliberative Democracy, Democratic Innovations, Democratic Transformations, Citizens' Assemblies, Vulnerabilities.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2021, the Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis (GA) gathered 100 citizens[1] from around the world in a virtual format to deliberate on the question: "How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?" During 68 hours of deliberative sessions distributed over 20 digital meetings from October to December, the GA participants interacted with scientific experts, shared lived experiences, and discussed political perspectives. This journey culminated in co-creating the People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth, which assembly members representatives presented at the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) in Glasgow.

The GA's pioneering approach, critical remit, and digital format inspired me to apply for a global call for facilitators and notetakers. Little did I know that this opportunity would shape my PhD journey and profoundly alter my perspective on the climate and environmental crisis and, most importantly, on citizen participation.

As a collaborator of the GA, I noticed that the participants and I experienced profound changes over time. Together, we revisited our understanding of the climate and ecological crisis, feeling a mix of emotions about the projections of what would happen to the world's environment if nothing changed. On the other hand, we also felt inspired and hopeful about the possible impacts we could achieve together in global governance through the GA outcomes.

This sense of transformation became even more tangible when I heard accounts of assembly members changing their daily habits and political stances on climate change, raising awareness within their social circles, and even being invited to share their GA experience in local media. It became clear that what was happening in the GA extended far beyond voting and consolidating recommendations for the People's Declaration. In other words, the democratic experiences of GA participants seemed to reverberate through their relationships with their environments and the people they interacted with, both during and after the deliberative events. If adequately nurtured, could this micropolitical process generate spill-over effects of democratic transformations worldwide?

Nevertheless, by observing the digital spaces where diverse citizens from around the world were connecting and participating in GA interactions and by listening to them, I realized that we were experiencing different participatory challenges in being part of the GA. For instance, while I faced constraints due to my PhD obligations, which prevented me from fully

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[1] Out of the intended 100 participants, 98 stayed engaged until the end of the process." (Global Assembly Team, 2022b, p.10)..

dedicating myself to exploring the topics and themes addressed in the GA, I noticed that some citizens from Africa lacked internet access and computers at home, requiring full support from community hosts to participate in this journey of political engagement. Others from Latin America and Asia depended entirely on English translation to fully engage in discussions and sometimes missed key parts of the conversation due to delays or misunderstandings in translation.

Affected by the potentialities and challenges of the GA, I wondered: How did the living conditions of assembly members shape their opportunities to develop more complex understandings of the climate and ecological crisis and foster democratic relationships with their environments and social worlds? At the same time, *what did they perceive* as the key challenges and transformative experiences within the GA? In sum, from the participants' perspective, how did the design and demands of the GA facilitate experiences of democratic transformation, and how did asymmetrical political vulnerabilities create variations in this process?

This thesis's main objective is to analyze the world's first global-scale citizens' assembly, the Global Assembly on Climate and Ecological Crisis, by examining the democratic transformative experiences and political vulnerabilities lived by its assembly members from their perspectives.

Chapter 1 examines why and how we should consider democracies and democratic innovations through *experience* and *vulnerability,* considering John Dewey's (1920, 1927, 1939, 1946, 1980) pragmatism and experiential theory of “creative democracy.”

For Dewey (1946), democracy is more than just elections; it involves normative commitments, institutions, and everyday interactive experiences that coordinate different associations of citizens (or publics) and political representatives in an ongoing process of addressing collective problems that directly affect their lives, such as the climate and ecological crisis (Dryzek, 2004; Bohman, 2004; Kadlec, 2007; Cefai, 2017; Prasad, 2021). However, when this process becomes merely mechanical and bureaucratic, failing to nurture a vibrant “democratic way of life” across all spheres of society and to ensure the “presence of democratic methods in all social relationships”, disenchantment, apathy, and even anti-democratic or authoritarian tendencies may emerge, threatening democracy from within (Dewey, 1939a, p. 225). In this sense, for Dewey and other key theorists (e.g., Pateman, 1970), creating opportunities for citizens to engage in democratic problem-solving—being challenged, cooperating, and experimenting with projects to address the issues that affect them—fosters the development of essential political, cognitive, and emotional skills, as well as social ties necessary for democracy (Pogrebinschi, 2004). In the long run, the values and practices cultivated in these

processes, whether institutionalized or not, would be internalized and enacted by individuals in all areas of their lives, allowing the "democratic way of life" to spread from the bottom up (Dewey, 1920; 1939a).

Understanding when and how democratic participatory processes and innovations foster transformative democratic experiences is fundamentally important for both political science and democracies. As Dewey (1980) suggests, only when experiences are genuinely relevant and occur under conditions where resistances and supports are adequately balanced can they enable a (democratic) "reconstruction" of an organism's naturalized cognition and behavior (Dewey, 1980, p. 36). Consequently, not all experiences an organism undergoes—whether within a democratic innovation or not—can automatically be regarded as democratic, transformative, or "vital," making this a problem that requires empirical examination.

At the same time, Dewey's experiential and creative theory of democracies has been criticized for its alleged "acquiescence" to structures and relations of power (e.g., Hildreth, 2009; Mendonça, 2016). Inspired by Patricia Hill Collins's (2012) reflections on pragmatism, I integrate the concepts of experience and democratic vital experience with key propositions from contemporary feminist theories of intersectionality and vulnerability to address this concern.

In sum, drawing especially on the work of Judith Butler (2009, 2015, 2021), I define vulnerability as a bodily ontological condition inherent to human beings, enabling our capacity to affect and be affected by the world—in other words, to experience and transform (Marques, 2018; Fineman, 2019). However, the networks of support and care we access asymmetrically shape how this primary vulnerability is modulated into different forms of vulnerability, potentially limiting our opportunities for personal and civic growth. In this sense, this thesis employs the concept of *political vulnerabilities* to describe how interactions between social actors, environments, and sociopolitical factors create unequal disadvantages, constraints, or harms that hinder citizens' opportunities to engage in transformative democratic experiences.

At the end of Chapter 1, I proposed an experiential framework to critically interpret the qualities and consequences of citizens' transformative experiences in the GA, aiming to: a) Recognize that citizens' bodily and social vulnerabilities are not homogeneous and that, depending on intersections of social demographic markers and living conditions, these differences shape how they experience the world and engage in political processes (Goodin, 1985; Gilson, 2011; Fineman, 2012; Mackenzie, 2014); b) Acknowledge that even citizens who are more vulnerable than others are not passive victims, and that researching their political experiences provides opportunities to improve institutions and democratic innovations by

incorporating their "response-abilities[2]" (Butler, 2009, 2015, 2021; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Veloso, 2022); c) Consider the standpoints and perspectives of vulnerable subjects as a foundation for political analysis and emphasize that methodologies aimed at mitigating biases and potential harms in representing political vulnerabilities should be a central concern in social and political science (Cole, 2017; Rancière, 1995).

In **Chapter 2**, after justifying, grounding, and defining the concepts of *democratic vital experiences* and *political vulnerabilities*, I present the results of a systematic literature review aimed at understanding how the propositions and findings from the extensive and rich literature on democratic innovations can be interpreted through these two concepts. The primary objective of this analysis was to examine how different approaches and definitions vary in determining which political vulnerabilities democratic innovations should address and what types of democratic experiences are considered ideal for achieving their goals. Additionally, considering the GA as the case study of this thesis, I analyzed how the theorization and practice of citizens' assemblies fit into this framework.

The most significant insights from this literature review were mobilized as key principles for constructing the research methodology of this thesis. First, just as the political vulnerabilities that democratic innovations seek to address—such as decision-making, epistemic, discursive, and policy effectiveness—are diverse, so too are the idealized conditions and outcomes proposed for fostering meaningful democratic transformations in individuals and democracies. In this sense, there is no universal formula for democratic innovations, though important common understandings were identified.

Second, evidence indicates that the design and demands of democratic innovations may not only fail to mitigate various political vulnerabilities experienced by citizens in representative democracies (e.g., barriers to participation, epistemic exclusion, discursive inequalities, and decision-making constraints) but may also exacerbate existing vulnerabilities or unintentionally create new ones. Consequently, addressing the complexity of democratic innovations requires careful consideration of contextuality and ambiguity in both their processes and consequences.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology developed to conduct a critical and experiential analysis of the Global Assembly (GA). A qualitative interpretive research design was employed, utilizing two versions of Grounded Theory methodology—Normative and Experiential—to generate data and draw abductive inferences about the conditions of emergence and

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[2] In this dissertation, response-abilities refer to acts of relational resistance and resilience, through which subjects navigate challenging or adverse experiences of vulnerability, potentially transforming them into vital experiences (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, p. 65-66)

consequences of democratic vital experiences and vulnerabilities encountered by GA participants from their perspectives.

The chapter begins by providing key details about the GA, the case study of this thesis. It highlights the GA's innovative and decentralized design, which engaged hundreds of collaborators from over 49 countries to create ideal deliberative conditions aimed at "giving everyone a seat at the global governance table" (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p. 25).

Next, I explain how the "four-core commitments" of Grounded Normative Theory (GNT) (Ackerly et al., 2021) informed the data generation strategy for this thesis. In addition to accessing official GA documentation, I participated in the GA evaluation team[3], contributing to the generation of in-depth interviews structured with a specialized experiential interview script. This approach enabled a diverse sample of the most vulnerable GA participants to reconstruct their participatory journeys and reflect on how the GA's design and demands intersected with their lives throughout the process. As I will demonstrate, this method enhanced our ability to capture the contextual nuances and ambiguities of their experiences. Furthermore, conducting the interviews in participants' native languages allowed us to better understand the terms, metaphors, and qualities they found most appropriate to describe themselves, their transformations, and their vulnerabilities. Interviews with GA organizers and collaborators supplemented this experiential dataset.

To analyze the generated data, I drew on the "ethnographic sensibility" (Schatz, 2009, p. 5) provided by my role as a former GA notetaker, while rigorously adhering to the (re)constructivist and experiential approach of Grounded Theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006). This qualitative methodology guided a line-by-line coding process and a reflective "constant comparison" of the experiences recounted in the interviews to understand the conditions of emergence and consequences of the experiences lived by each interviewed assembly member, complemented by the perspectives of GA community hosts and organizers. Subsequently, a bottom-up categorization of the initial experiential codes, based on their similarities and differences, allowed me to identify distinct types of vital experiences, political vulnerabilities, "response-abilities," and adverse events at each stage of the GA process. These grounded categories were integrated into theoretical analytic histories organized by "axial categories,"

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[3] The Global Assembly underwent an external evaluation by an international team of researchers led by Professor Nicole Curato from the University of Canberra. This team was independent, with no involvement in GA decision-making, focusing solely on observing the design and implementation process and sharing their insights with the organizers. They had access to all GA-generated data, including recordings of deliberative sessions and citizen surveys, and also generated their own data. As a member of the GA evaluation team, I conducted many in-depth semi-structured interviews with organizers, collaborators, and participating citizens, focusing on mapping disadvantages and political asymmetries in the Core Assembly journey.

such as recognition, democratic deliberation, and sense of political efficacy, which facilitated connections with democratic theory and practice. Finally, through these analytical narratives, I illustrate how various intersections of bodily characteristics, sociodemographic markers, and living conditions of assembly members introduced variations in the qualities and consequences of their participatory journeys.

In the second part of the thesis, comprising **chapters 4, 5, and 6**, I present three primary sets of vital democratic experiences identified through Grounded Theory categorical analysis. Each set is elaborated through analytical stories that reveal the conditions of emergence and variations in participants' experiences within the GA. These narratives also examine how the interplay between the GA's design and demands influenced participants' political vulnerabilities, shedding light on the types of participatory disadvantages they encountered during their journeys. In these chapters, distinct axial concepts drawn from democratic theories—such as "democratic appearance" and "deliberation"—are employed alongside concepts that emerged from Grounded Theory itself, such as "empathetic-reflexivity" and "practical representatives." These concepts serve as interpretive tools to weave together the reconstructed experiential narratives, providing a nuanced understanding of the participants' democratic experiences and their broader implications.

Chapter 4 uncovers the democratic transformations experienced by the research subjects when they were selected in the GA lottery and had the opportunity to participate in the digital interactions of the Global Assembly (GA). These processes, which might appear trivial at first glance, were highlighted by the interviewees as vital experiences. Not only did they disrupt their habitual daily routines, as Dewey (1949) suggests, but they also reshaped their political identities by enabling them to experiment with new conditions of democratic appearance (Arendt, 1958) and democratic recognition (Honneth, 1995; Mendonça, 2009c; 2011; 2012).

The Grounded Theory analysis of these experiences revealed that, beyond the opportunities to engage in new political "self-disclosures" (Arendt, 1958) and "practical self-relations" (Honneth, 1995), the novel conditions of democratic appearance and recognition provided by the GA fostered: a) Motivation for individuals to persist in the democratic innovation journey despite the participatory costs and demands; b) Changes in individuals' political identities and their sense of being political representatives for a broader social cause, specifically the climate and ecological emergency.

Additionally, I observed that other citizens not directly involved in the GA began recognizing GA participants as their "practical" political representatives. This recognition

arose, among other things, from the assembly members' ability to convey non-assembly members' opinions and perspectives to the GA. This situation underscores an unexplored connection between global democratic innovation and local communities.

While the GA's design was innovative and effective in transforming the conditions of democratic appearance and recognition for our interviewees, it also imposed significant demands and constraints. During the pandemic context of 2021, many participants faced challenges in accessing the necessary technological resources to connect to the GA. Furthermore, contextual factors such as war, violence, neoliberalism, and patriarchy influenced the conditions of participation for assembly members, placing some at a greater disadvantage than others. Although the resources and support provided by community hosts and translators helped mitigate these challenges, they also created dependencies that translated into political vulnerabilities, resulting in concrete political harm in at least two instances.

On the other hand, the analyzed experiences demonstrated political "response-abilities," particularly through participants' personal networks, such as family, which enabled them to persist in this unique and transformative participatory process.

Chapter 5 examines the transformative learning experiences of the Global Assembly (GA) from the perspective of its assembly members. The experiential accounts shared by the research subjects revealed that all participants developed a more nuanced understanding of the climate and ecological crisis, both scientifically and politically. Key design elements of the GA were identified as instrumental in driving these transformations. Pedagogical tools, such as the information booklet, collective readings during deliberative sessions, and the active role of facilitators in explaining and clarifying concepts, proved particularly effective in conveying complex scientific information. On the political front, testimonies from GA-invited witnesses who shared their firsthand experiences of precarious situations caused by climate change played a pivotal role in helping members grasp the importance of addressing justice and fairness in climate discussions. Stillr, it was less evident that assembly members developed a more sophisticated understanding of the possibilities for political action to tackle the climate and ecological crisis.

In terms of political vulnerabilities, I found that participants who were older, had lower levels of formal education, or had less time to study the GA materials at home faced greater disadvantages in the learning process, particularly in engaging with the conceptually dense and text-heavy information booklet. Once again, the personal networks of assembly members, including family and community hosts, proved crucial in helping them develop "response-abilities" to overcome these challenges.

The findings, however, become more ambiguous when considering the "classroom" environment, as described by interviewees, that characterized the GA's digital synchronous learning interactions. On the one hand, this environment supported disadvantaged participants who lacked the time and autonomy to study the materials at home, enabling them to keep pace with their peers. On the other hand, it reinforced hierarchical roles, with facilitators and participants positioned as "teachers" and "students," respectively. This dynamic created discursive hierarchies that were not conducive to deliberative environments, often leading to uncritical deference to expert knowledge and, in some cases, the devaluation of peer contributions.

In the chapter's conclusion, I explore how the concepts of "emancipatory education" from John Dewey (1916) and Paulo Freire (1970) and "political translation" from Nicole Doerr (2021) could inspire critical innovations in the way scientific information is integrated into democratic innovation environments. These frameworks offer valuable insights for rethinking how knowledge is shared and co-constructed in participatory processes, ensuring that learning experiences are both inclusive and empowering.

Finally, **Chapter 6** explores why the deliberative journey of our research interviewees constituted a vital democratic experience for them and the concrete transformations they underwent as a result of these interactions. The theoretical axial concept that organizes and weaves together the experiential findings of this chapter is *deliberation*, defined here as "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern" (Bächtiger et al., 2018, pp. 1–2).

Through an analysis of the GA deliberative journeys, I found that participants came to value their political interactions and the main outcome, the People's Declaration, as genuinely democratic and remarkable. This was largely due to their experience of equal opportunities for speaking, listening, and having their contributions recognized—a process that starkly contrasted their everyday relationships with politics and democracy. Additionally, they developed what I term "empathetic-reflexivity" regarding the climate and ecological crisis and the individuals suffering from its consequences. This intersubjective achievement appears to have been key in sustaining their political engagement and interest in addressing this collective problem, even three months after their deliberative journey concluded.

Furthermore, the process of crafting the People's Declaration—through respectful debate, dissent, consolidation of understandings, and presentation of results—fostered a sense of political competence and efficacy among participants, as conceptualized by Carole Pateman (1970). This sense of efficacy is crucial for advancing democracy as a "way of life" across all

social spheres, as Dewey (1939) also advocates. In the conclusion chapter, I will elaborate on how this sense of political efficacy, alongside other democratic transformations experienced by participants, motivated several assembly members to remain engaged in climate politics within their local political spheres, raising awareness and implementing actions to address the climate and ecological emergency.

Still, despite the overall positive evaluation of the GA deliberative journey, certain design trade-offs and omissions created asymmetric deliberative disadvantages and harms for participants. Factors such as disparities in formal education, class, social status, fluency in English, and gendered power dynamics influenced the frequency and quality of assembly members' speech. Promising technologies like the Miro board posed challenges for participants with limited technological skills and access. Additionally, new trade-offs emerged concerning the roles of facilitators and translators, highlighting the complex interplay of mutual support and political dependency that citizens can encounter even in the most well-designed democratic innovations.

The thesis concludes by presenting three key insights derived from the Grounded Theory framework used to analyze transformative democratic experiences and vulnerabilities in the GA. These insights contribute to significant debates in the fields of democratic innovation and democratic theory: a) The integration of transformative democratic experiences, social life, and broader democracy; b) The intricate relationship between political vulnerabilities and democratic innovations; c) Early considerations of an *ecological* approach to democratic innovations.

These findings underscore the importance of designing democratic processes that are not only inclusive and empowering but also attentive to the diverse vulnerabilities and dependencies that participants bring to the table.

1. CREATIVE DEMOCRACY, VITAL EXPERIENCES AND VULNERABILITIES

The main objective of this thesis is to analyze the Global Assembly (GA) on the Climate and Ecological Crisis through the lens of the democratic transformative experiences it afforded to the citizens who participated in this democratic innovation. I use the term afforded to emphasize my focus on investigating how the interactions between the demands and design of the GA, on the one hand, and the sociodemographic characteristics and vulnerabilities of the assembly members, on the other, shaped the quality and consequences of their participatory journey. To achieve these objectives, this thesis not only constructs a robust conceptual framework but also explores why understanding democratic innovations through the lenses of experience and vulnerability is crucial for democracies. This exploration begins with a comprehensive analysis of John Dewey's social and political theory (1916, 1917, 1920, 1929, 1939a, 1939b, 1941, 1946, 1980).

Dewey's political theory has been widely discussed in the fields of political theory and science (Talisse, 2005; Hildreth, 2009; Collins, 2012; Hildebrand, 2022; Peterson, 2022), particularly through his concepts of the public (e.g., Cefaï, 2017; Prasad, 2021), citizen participation, and communication (e.g., Mendonça, 2013; 2016; Pogrebinschi, 2004), as well as in theoretical and normative debates closely tied to deliberative democracy (e.g., Dryzek, 2004; Bohman, 2004; Kadlec, 2007). These works highlight the significance of Dewey’s democratic theory in expanding democracy beyond elections, norms, and institutions, framing these as collective tools employed by the public or associations of citizens and political representatives to address issues that directly impact their lives (Dewey, 1946).

Furthermore, Dewey’s understanding of democracy extends beyond the notion of a "community of inquiry" (Prasad, 2021) to encompass the transformative experiences it fosters in citizens. Dewey argues that the cognitive, emotional, and practical learnings citizens gain through democratic participation are the primary drivers for spreading a democratic way of life across all societal spheres. This, in turn, leads to a "freer and more humane experience" capable of bringing into existence "things that have not existed in the past," such as new relationships between humans and nature (Dewey, 1939, p. 466).

But what are the specifics and conditions of these democratic transformative or “vital” experiences? This question lies at the heart of this thesis, as it seeks to uncover how the GA, as a democratic innovation, created conditions for participants to undergo profound shifts in their political identities, understandings, and capacities. By examining the interplay between the GA’s design, the sociodemographic characteristics of participants, and the vulnerabilities they faced, this research aims to shed light on the mechanisms through which democratic

innovations can foster transformative experiences. These experiences, in turn, have the potential to deepen democratic engagement and contribute to a more inclusive and responsive democratic culture.

Having examined the characteristics of Dewey's democratic theory, this chapter delves into the notion of *experience*, a central concept in his understanding of democracy and democratic participation. What stands out in Dewey's theorization is the insight that not all experiences undergone by organisms truly transform or "reconstruct" them. Dewey (1980) argues that only certain experiences are "vital"—that is, they provoke organisms to question and transform the habitual ways in which they relate to themselves, others, and the world. In essence, these vital experiences tend to occur when experiences genuinely fulfill needs and impulsions, evoke emotions and new meanings, and are lived under conditions where resistance and support are adequately balanced (Dewey, 1980, p. 36). This proposition holds significant importance when reflecting on the potential and challenges of contemporary democratic innovations, such as the Global Assembly, to create participatory processes that truly include and meaningfully engage extremely diverse citizens worldwide.

Before presenting an interpretative framework to analyze democratic innovations through the lens of *vital experiences*, it is necessary to address the limitations of Dewey's theory. The second part of this chapter engages with criticisms directed at Dewey's pragmatism, particularly its treatment of power structures and relationships. In this examination, I draw on Patricia Hill Collins's insightful proposition (2012, p. 455) to enhance pragmatism's "ready-made set of conceptual tools for advancing arguments about social inequalities" by integrating them with contemporary critical theories. My specific contribution to this endeavor is to refine Dewey's concept of experience by considering it through the lens of feminist theories of vulnerability.

In broad terms, vulnerability is understood as an ontological condition of our bodily existence, responsible for our innate capacity to affect and be affected by others and the world. In this sense, vulnerability is neither inherently good nor bad but a potential to live diverse experiences, which can be empowering, risky, or harmful. Vulnerability, as an embodied ontological condition, is sociopolitically modulated into distinct and asymmetric vulnerabilities—such as material precarity and political disadvantages and oppressions—depending on how social structures and institutions distribute resources and supports in each context. This modulation makes vulnerability a central concern for realizing egalitarian democratic ideals (Butler, 2009; 2016; 2021). Consequently, through the lens of vulnerability theory, understanding the conditions under which democratic innovations promote vital

democratic experiences requires considering the embodied and social characteristics of the citizens involved, as well as mapping the material, relational, and environmental conditions of their political engagement.

In synthesis, the theoretical connection I propose in this chapter between the concepts of (vital) experiences and vulnerabilities enhances the critical sensitivity of Dewey's theory in at least three ways: a) It justifies why we must recognize that some organisms and groups are more vulnerable to risks, harms, and injuries than others, even though human vulnerability is a universally shared attribute and a condition for experiencing the world; b) It highlights the synergy between Dewey's notion of experience and the generative aspects of vulnerability, particularly their potential to serve as principles for democratic alliances and the "response-abilities" of political actors (Butler and Athanasiou, 2013, pp. 65–66; 107); c) It acknowledges the power asymmetries, biases, and limitations present in political epistemologies and practices, including democratic innovations, in addressing the vulnerabilities experienced by diverse citizens.

In the final reflections of this theoretical chapter, I propose objective characteristics and dimensions of a framework for interpreting democratic innovations based on the concepts of experience and vulnerability developed earlier. This framework aims to provide a nuanced understanding of how democratic innovations can foster transformative experiences while addressing the vulnerabilities and power dynamics that shape participants' engagement. By integrating Dewey's insights with contemporary critical theories, this approach seeks to advance both the theory and practice of democratic participation in ways that are inclusive, empowering, and responsive to the diverse realities of citizens..

1.1 Creative and experiential democracy

1.1.1 John Dewey's pragmatism or "cultural naturalism[4]"

John Dewey (1859–1952) was a leading American philosopher and educational reformer whose work profoundly influenced democratic theory and practice worldwide. Although his theory is complex and extensive, its foundational characteristics can be understood through his critique of the philosophical and practical "compartmentalization" of life into distinct realms—such as art, economy, social life, and nature—a trend that reached its

[4] John Dewey (1859–1952) was a prominent American philosopher and educator, often associated with the American pragmatist tradition; although he preferred to label his work as "cultural naturalism" (Hildebrand, 2022, p.26). Dewey's intellectual reach extended across various domains, including logic, ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, and religion.

peak during Western modernity[5]. Dewey's critique and the concepts associated with it are central to this thesis because they support one of its main propositions: political institutions and democratic innovations cannot be studied in isolation from how citizens experience these modes of political association and how these interactions provoke consequences in their bodies, minds, and relationships with the world. But why is this "decompartmentalized" way of thinking so important for Dewey?

Delving into Western philosophy, Dewey identifies a recurring ontological discourse that dichotomizes the world into static ("essential") and dynamic ("accidental") elements, such as spirit and matter. This division, he argues, underpins hierarchical systems of moral, political, and practical values used to interpret and categorize concrete reality. In Aristotle, Dewey detects a preference for what is deemed "necessary" in ethical and existential terms, while what is contingent and mutable is viewed as deficient or inferior (Dewey, 1929, p. 48). Similarly, he criticizes Immanuel Kant for segregating existence into sensory and rational realms, treating sense-based experiences as not only weaker in explaining causal relationships but also as morally inferior (Dewey, 1929, p. 49).

Inspired by the biological-ecological evolutionary theories of his time, Dewey sought to understand the world's inherent dynamism without perpetuating or creating new ontological divisions and hierarchies. He challenged traditional compartmentalization and hierarchical views of reality, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all entities in the world—physical, mental, or cultural—through non-linear interactions or "transactions." Dewey argues that this dynamic interconnectedness is essential for explaining transformation and "growth" in all modes of existence. According to him, it is illogical to isolate entities or establish an a priori hierarchy of influence between entities in the world to investigate their characteristics, as they are always in relation. Dewey encapsulates this idea by stating, "There is no action without reaction; there is no exclusively one-way exercise of conditioning power (...). Whatever influences the changes of other things is itself changed" (Dewey, 1929, p. 73).

Dewey's argument is crucial in justifying why the concepts of interaction, transformation, and growth are central to this research. However, their significance will become clearer once they are connected to his democratic theory. Before doing so, I will further explore the epistemological core of Dewey's cultural naturalistic sociology: the idea of "analytic

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[5] "Life is compartmentalized and the institutionalized compartments are classified as high and low; their values are profane and spiritual, as low; their values as profane and spiritual, as material and ideal. Interests are related to one another externally and mechanically, through a system of checks and balances. (Dewey, 1980, p.20)".

reconstruction," which will be key to the Grounded Theory Methodology employed in this thesis[6].

Pragmatically, Dewey suggests that societies, institutions, and other human constructs should be understood as historical efforts to impose "a discernible order of changes" by utilizing "means and things" to "produce consequences" (Dewey, 1929, p. 72). In other words, just as living organisms adapt to and alter their environments to meet their needs and desires, their activities, tools, and institutions evolve, reflecting ongoing attempts to manage the consequences of their interactions with the world. Dewey's cultural naturalism rejects fixed and transcendent causes to explain the persistence and variation of human phenomena over time, asserting that the answer lies in analyzing the concrete experiences of socio-historical groups as they strive to survive or fulfill their desires and ideals. To understand why different societies employ diverse practices, artifacts, and institutions, Dewey advocates for an "analytic dismemberment" and "reconstruction" (Dewey, 1920, pp. 40, 48) of the "general features of experienced things." This process aims to (i) grasp the material, historical, and contextual consequences that a group of organisms sought to control and (ii) understand how this process triggered transformations in their habitual ways of living together.

As previously noted, for Dewey, experiencing the world is not merely a passive fact of existence for living organisms. Due to the consequences of their experiences, organisms are motivated to seek ways to alter their relationships with the world and improve their existential conditions, realizing their impulsions and ideals. From an epistemological standpoint, studying how a group of beings experiences a given context is key to understanding why certain practices and institutions operate in a particular manner and what drives them to change over time. Moreover, if we desire human constructs and institutions to promote different consequences and impacts, it is necessary to understand *the qualities of experiences* they encourage or constrain organisms to undergo.

Before delving deeper into the concept of experience to examine its characteristics and conditions, it is important to explore how the notions discussed in this section are present in Dewey's democratic theory and his conception of democratic innovation.

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[6] Dewey's concept of "analytic reconstruction" refers to the process of critically examining and reinterpreting existing knowledge and practices to uncover their underlying assumptions and dynamics. This approach aligns with the principles of Grounded Theory, which emphasizes generating theory from data through iterative processes of coding, categorization, and conceptualization. By applying Dewey's insights to the study of democratic innovations like the Global Assembly, this research seeks to reconstruct the lived experiences of participants, uncovering how their interactions with the GA's design and demands led to transformative democratic experiences.

1.1.2. Creative democracies

When examining democracy through the lens of John Dewey's pragmatism or cultural naturalism, it becomes clear that he views this political regime as more than just a specific set of norms, institutions, and procedures. Instead, he sees it as a continuous participatory process of “inquiry for problem-solving” (Hildebrand, 2022, p. 32; Cefaï, 2017; Prasad, 2021). However, the problem-solving aspect of his definition, while necessary, is not sufficient to fully capture his conceptualization of democracy (Pogrebinschi, 2004). I will argue that vital experiences and the growth of individual and collective organisms—particularly those fostered by political participatory processes and democratic innovations aimed at promoting freedom, equality, and human development—are central to Dewey's democratic theory and vision (Bohman, 2004; Dryzek, 2004; Mendonça, 2016). This is because, for Dewey, democracy is “a personal way of individual life” rooted in “the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life” (Dewey, 1939a, p. 226).

One of the most frequently cited political definitions of John Dewey's extensive body of work comes from his 1927 piece, *The Public and Its Problems* (1946). In this work, Dewey critiques definitions of the State that seek to identify a singular event or primary cause for its foundation, rather than understanding it as a dynamic and evolving mode of association. He views the State as the result of collective efforts to address and manage the consequences of issues affecting groups of individuals or publics. Unsurprisingly, he characterizes the State as an endeavor to promote “the organization of the public, achieved through officials, for the protection of interests shared by its members” (Dewey, 1946, p. 33). In essence, the State is a human construct designed to “organize the public,” serving as a mechanism to coordinate the interactions of diverse groups of citizens. These interactions occur both directly and through officials who “fulfill their role of safeguarding the public interest” (ibid.). But what exactly is a public, and why does Dewey consider it so significant?

The concept of the public is deeply intertwined with the recognition that all living organisms, including humans, must continually adapt to an ever-changing environment. One effective way to navigate this is through collective action or association. As Cefai (2017) explains, collective mobilization or associations arise when members of a community—initially undefined in terms of boundaries, size, and composition—begin to feel directly or indirectly impacted by a "disturbance" they encounter. At first, this disturbance may be vague, difficult to pinpoint, and not yet acknowledged by the broader public. However, as these individuals come to define it as a problematic situation, they decide to take action to address it. In this

process, the public emerges as "a group distinctive enough to require recognition and a name," composed of those "indirectly and seriously affected" by consequences of their lived realities that demand their attention (Dewey, 1946, p. 35).

Yet, the public is a heterogeneous entity whose needs, goals, and actions are not always harmonious. Furthermore, the public is in a constant state of flux and variation, as collective problems and controversies continually arise across the globe. In this sense, States and democracies, which exist to coordinate diverse publics based on core normative values—as I will discuss later—must also undergo perpetual reconstruction and innovation. As Dewey notes, "the means by which a public can determine the government to serve its interests vary" (Dewey, 1946, p. 33). In summary, Dewey argues that "since conditions of action, inquiry, and knowledge are always changing," the State "must always be rediscovered" (Dewey, 1946, p. 84). This implies that the State and democracy should be seen as ongoing projects, continuously remade and reinvented through constant experimentation and innovation, driven by the experiences and initiatives of individuals within any given context (Mendonça, 2016, p. 740).

Now that we have established the necessary foundation, we can better grasp what democratic innovation or "creative democracies" means for Dewey and why this concept is deeply tied to normative ideals such as freedom, equality, publicity, and growth. It is also intricately connected to his understanding of experience and experimentation—whether institutional or not—a topic that has received far less attention in academic literature compared to his concepts of the public and communication, as Pogrebinschi (2004) has previously noted.

As I sought to illustrate in the previous section, Dewey views lived experiences as the driving force behind the formation of sociohistorical publics. These publics, while striving to manage the consequences of a world that impacts them, continuously interact with existing institutions and the State, demanding their transformation and innovation to address emerging problems. In this context, Dewey sees democracy as a form of government that creates the ideal conditions for public inquiry, enabling "self-correcting communities of inquiry" to engage in an ongoing "exploratory engagement with the world" to improve collective life (Prasad, 2021, p. 6). However, Dewey's vision extends beyond the interactions of self-organized publics. He also emphasizes the importance of institutionalized political participation, which (i) provides opportunities for individuals to employ "methods such that experimentation may proceed less blindly, less at the mercy of accident, and more intelligently" (Dewey, 1946, p. 34), and (ii) ensures the conditions of political freedom and publicity while fostering the "interaction between publics that deliberative democracy requires" (Bohman, 2007, p. 81).

While these two characteristics are essential to defining creative democracies and democratic innovations in Dewey's framework, we must delve deeper into the details and implications of these principles, as well as other aspects of his complex perspective.

Deliberative democrats like John Dryzek suggest that Dewey's model of democracy could succeed if it were able to establish "islands of deliberative practice in the ocean of partisan politics, with the hope that they might, over time, expand their territory as they demonstrate their effectiveness" (Dryzek, 2004, pp. 72–79). But how should these "islands" be constructed, and what should take place within them?

On the one hand, Dewey advocates for a scientific-political inquiry to guide the experiments necessary for citizens and the public to address the problems that affect them. This approach would enhance the ongoing experimentation of democracies by providing a structured methodology to improve evaluation processes, enabling them to learn from past mistakes and grow more effective over time. As detailed in Dewey's work and further elaborated by Petersen (2022, p. 1431), this process should not be perceived as idealistic or elitist. Instead, it must be firmly grounded in the practicalities and complexities of human lived experiences[7]. In my view, the scientific aspect that Dewey highlights is that experiences can only become tools to promote effective transformations in reality when their conditions of occurrence and consequences are adequately examined by a plural and democratic "community of inquiry," as I will argue later.

Some theorists overemphasize Dewey's scientific approach as a guide for ongoing experimentation within the State, interpreting his proposition as instrumentalist and technocratic. This interpretation risks reinforcing the problematic aspects of a capitalist economy and a bureaucratic state, as scholars such as Horkheimer (1947, p. 35) and Marcuse (1939, pp. 258–265) have argued. On the other hand, a deeper exploration of the democratic issues Dewey identified as problematic in his time reveals that his concept of "creative democracy" and democratic innovation extends far beyond merely using scientific methods to enhance governmental and bureaucratic responsiveness to public interests and problems through technocratic experiments. This is because one of the core tenets of Dewey's democratic theory is understanding how democracy, as a way of life, can foster *vital experiences* and *growth* for individuals and communities.

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[7] Through inquiry, an indeterminate situation becomes, then, first, a problematic situation. Problem description and definition determine the selection of hypotheses, data, and conceptual structures. In the subsequent stage, all the determinate constituents of the undetermined situation are reconstructed. These constitute 'the facts of the case' (or 'terms of the problem') and any hypothesis must take these facts into account. In the process of inquiry, then, various ideas (or possible solutions) are applied to a problem. And the solution becomes gradually more suitable through anticipation of a variety of consequences (Dewey 1939, 105–110; Petersen, 2022, p.1431)

Dewey's political analysis highlights the intricate challenges that democracies and individuals face in modernity, aligning closely with various critical theories, such as those of the Frankfurt School (Mendonça, 2013). He particularly emphasizes how "changes in domestic economic and political relations have led to a significant weakening of the social bonds that unite people" (Dewey, 1920, p. 20). Dewey's critique of the compartmentalization of modern life is stark, as I have previously noted, pointing out that "only occasionally in the lives of many are the senses filled with the sentiment that arises from a profound understanding of intrinsic meanings"—a situation that undermines the transformative experiences essential for personal and collective growth (ibid.).

In *Creative Democracy - The Task Before Us*, written during the rise of Nazism and the onset of World War II, Dewey expands his critique, challenging the notion that democracy is merely an external, self-perpetuating mechanism based on bureaucratic solutions to collective problems (Dewey, 1939a, p. 225). In this work, he argues that to move beyond this mechanization of democracy, it is crucial to recognize democracy as "a personal way of individual life" rooted in "the possession and continual use of certain attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life" (Dewey, 1939a, p. 226). For authors like Pogrebinschi (2004, pp. 338–339), Dewey's understanding of democracy is radical, as it demands a profound democratic transformation of all existing social, economic, legal, and cultural institutions.

Dewey suggests that a democratic way of life can emerge in various settings, from informal interactions like "free gatherings of neighbors on the street corner" to more structured ones such as "gatherings of friends in the living rooms of houses and apartments" (Dewey, 1939a, p. 227). These examples illustrate that democracy is realized in everyday interactions and communal engagements, where individuals come together to share ideas, experiences, and perspectives, fostering an environment of mutual respect and understanding essential for democracy to thrive. Beyond informal arenas, Dewey also supports citizen participation in institutionalized, empowered spaces, arguing that "the best guarantee of collective efficiency and power is the liberation and use of the diversity of individual capacities in initiative, planning, foresight, vigor, and endurance" (Dewey, 1920, p. 209).

To address the challenges that may hinder the positive outcomes of democratic innovations, it is essential to draw on Dewey's insights. Dewey identifies freedom, equality, and publicity among citizens as pivotal factors in realizing democracy as a way of life (Mendonça, 2016). However, he also cautions against the naivety of overlooking the inevitable emergence of conflicts and disputes within the democratic process. He acknowledges that

dissensus and conflicts are inherent to democracy (Cefai, 2017, p. 190). The critical question, then, is how to foster a democratic "faith in peace," which hinges on the belief in the feasibility of managing controversies and conflicts as cooperative endeavors (Pogrebinschi, 2004, p. 50). In this approach, the parties involved can learn and grow by allowing each other to express their viewpoints. Rather than resorting to the forceful suppression of one party by another—even when executed through psychological means such as ridicule, abuse, or intimidation, which amount to violence—a democratic ethos advocates for cooperation (Dewey, 1939a, p. 228). However, as Mendonça (2009a) argues, cooperation should not be seen as a simplistic, altruistic practice of yielding to or agreeing with the other. Instead, it can be an "agonistic cooperation" characterized by normative values such as reciprocity and mutual engagement.

In sum, it is crucial to revisit Dewey's vision of an ideal democratic way of life, which transcends mere technocratic problem-solving—a perspective that continues to be critiqued by contemporary theorists (e.g., Bua and Bussu, 2021). Dewey envisions democracy as "the ability of human experience to generate the aims and methods by which further experience will grow in ordered richness" (Dewey, 1939a, p. 229). This vision is not about fostering any experience but specifically aims at cultivating *vital* experiences that "develop and satisfy need and desire by increasing knowledge of things as they are" (ibid.). Dewey posits that these vital experiences "open the way into the unexplored and unattained future," driving cognitive, emotional, and practical transformations that spread democracy across all societal spheres. This leads to a "freer and more humane experience" and creates "things that have not existed in the past," such as, we can hope, new relationships between humans and nature (Dewey, 1939, p. 466).

Finally, it is important to recognize that Dewey also articulates a normative horizon and a collective project of melioristic experimentation. He understands "meliorism" as a normative concept that proposes "that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event, may be bettered" (Dewey, 1920, p. 177). Dewey further clarifies that "Growth itself is the only moral end," emphasizing that the essence of democracy lies in the ceaseless pursuit of improving concrete lives (Dewey, 1920, p. 178). Democracy, in this sense, is an endless quest to enrich the human experience, propelled by an unwavering commitment to freedom, equality, and progress. Thus, democracy is not merely a problem-solving governance model or a community of inquiry but also a way of life dedicated to the unending and perpetual flourishing and growth of every interconnected organism.

1.1.3 Experience and "vital experience"

In the previous section, I explored why and how Dewey's theory conceptualizes democracies and democratic innovations. On one level, he views them as constructs that create ideal democratic conditions to coordinate various associations of citizens or publics and political representatives engaged in solving concrete problems that affect them (Dewey, 1946). However, democracies are also ways of life—collective experiences where citizens have the opportunity to be challenged by and experiment with new political projects and practices. These experiences serve not only to construct new, legitimate, and effective solutions to collective problems but also to develop cognitive and emotional potentials, nurture social ties, and spread transformative experiences to all other spheres of life, thereby expanding and enriching democracies (Dewey, 1920, 1939a).

On the other hand, Dewey also developed an extensive theory aimed at understanding the conditions under which experiences—whether political, artistic, or otherwise—can effectively promote the cognitive and emotional reconstruction and growth of the experiencing organism. As I will demonstrate, this aspect of Dewey's theoretical framework can inspire those seeking to comprehend why certain aspects of democratic innovations are more or less successful in unlocking the full potential of such political experimentation, allowing it to occur "less blindly," as we reflected in the previous section. To begin, I will define the core concepts of *experience* and *vital experiences*.

Dewey defines *experience* as the never-ending process through which forms of life, and even inanimate entities, are continuously "undergoing and doing"—being affected by and affecting each other and their environment (Dewey, 1980, pp. 35, 44). Consequently, according to Dewey, all entities in the world are perpetually immersed in an unending stream of experiences because they are always engaged in interactions with some aspect of the world. However, in our lives, we perceive that certain experiences carry greater significance and transform us more profoundly than others. Why does this occur?

Dewey emphasizes that not all experiences lived by mind-body organisms through their myriad interactions in the world are consciously registered or "taken in" by consciousness (Dewey, 1980, pp. 41, 53). For example, in our daily routines, we often struggle to remember the specifics of our meals, sometimes forgetting them just hours later. Conversely, certain experiences remain distinctly memorable and singular. An ordinary dinner, for instance, can be transformed into a deeply memorable event if it is eagerly anticipated and shared with someone dear who has been living abroad for months, potentially standing out as an "enduring memorial of what food may be" (Dewey, 1980, p. 36). In contrast, dining alone in a high-end restaurant

may be quickly forgotten, leaving no lasting impression on our understanding of a memorable meal.

Dewey's concept of "an" experience or "vital experience" refers to a specific set of interactions that stand out as consciously singularized within the continuous flow of everyday general experiences (Dewey, 1980, p. 36). These experiences become more significant than others because they often lead to a *reconstruction* of the mechanical or habitual ways in which an organism perceives and interacts with the world[8].

In this sense, vital experiences transform how an organism or a community apprehends, signifies, and relates to others and their environment. This definition will be central to the experiential framework I have constructed to interpret democratic innovations for this thesis.

Dewey hypothesizes about the pattern and structure of vital experiences, considering the various material, temporal, emotional, and cognitive dimensions of experiencing something in the world (Dewey, 1980, pp. 43–44). Consistent with the principles of his cultural naturalism, the first aspect of any vital experience, according to him, is the internal impulsion an organism feels, which drives it to employ means to change its environment and alter the consequences of its current experience within a given context.

For Dewey, every vital experience, regardless of whether it holds "slight or tremendous import," typically begins with an impulsion to satisfy a need[9] (Dewey, 1980, p.58). Notwithstanding, Dewey clearly distinguishes *impulsion* from a mere "impulse," such as an automatic reaction or a nervous tic. He characterizes impulsion as a "movement outward and forward of the whole organism" aimed at establishing new relations or interactions with the environment (Dewey, 1980, p. 58). In simpler terms, impulsion represents a profound need or drive that prompts the entire organism—encompassing its physical, emotional, and cognitive dimensions—to forge new relationships with some aspect of the world (Dewey, 1980, p. 17).

If the effort to establish new connections with the world represents a recurring pattern of vital experiences, then the fulfillment or completeness of this effort, regardless of the outcome, constitutes another structural aspect. In this sense, an experience must be fulfilled or completed to become a distinct and singular entity within an organism's flow of experiences and memory (Dewey, 1980, p. 12). However, it is essential to acknowledge that the fulfillment

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[8] "For "taking in" in any vital experience is something more than placing something on the top of consciousness over what was previously known. It involves reconstruction which may be painful." (Dewey, 1980, p.41).

[9] That understanding is once more rooted in Dewey's cultural naturalism, which does not perceive humans as ethereal beings, but rather as mind-body organisms striving to enhance their living conditions. (Hildebrand, 2022, p.26).

of an impulsion, on its own, does not automatically confer significance and value on an experience. While fulfillment is a prerequisite for delineating a discrete experiential unit in the flow of consciousness, the meaning and impact of the experience depend on two other intertwined processes: a) the emergence of *emotions* that arise from the attempt to fulfill an impulsion and the establishment of a new relationship with the world[10]; b) a conscious or unconscious *comparison* that an organism enacts between past and present emotional experiences, that will be responsible for assigning or updating m*eanings* of fulfilled experiences.

The processes discussed above collectively contribute to making a certain set of interactional experiences "emotionally and practically distinguished" from other events encountered previously by an organism (Dewey, 1980, p. 37). However, between the attempt to establish new relations with the world and the fulfillment of this impulsion, we can identify another necessary condition for a vital experience to occur: the production of a variation in the habitual life rhythm of a given organism. Let's explore the reasons behind this phenomenon.

According to Dewey, when an organism experiences a need—whether it is a basic requirement to live, such as hunger, or a more nuanced one, like a desire for companionship—it is driven by a "lack that denotes at least a temporary absence of adequate adjustment with surroundings" (Dewey, 1980, p. 164). This misalignment, however, is not solely about an organism's innate desire for conservation, order, and stability. On the contrary, Dewey recognizes that organisms also strive for variation in their state or flow of experiences. In this sense, an organism that repeatedly fulfills impulsions in almost the same manner every time mechanically diminishes its chances of living a vital experience. As we discussed earlier, this is one of the reasons Dewey criticizes political regimes that rely on external mechanisms to perpetuate bureaucratic solutions to collective problems, thereby keeping citizens from the opportunity to collectively and creatively address the existential challenges they face in a given context (Dewey, 1939a, p. 225).

Dewey invites us to consider that to experience meaningful variations in life, a body-mind organism or community must step out of a socio-historical status quo. They must take risks, challenge established habits and conditions, and engage in drama, struggles, and

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[10] We need to stress the importance of *emotions* in Dewey's theory. The indiscriminate affects an organism experiences while interacting with the world are differentiated and signified by the emotions that someone attributes to their feelings. In this sense, emotions are significant markers of the "moment of transition from disturbance into harmony" and vice-versa, serving as a "conscious sign of a break, actual or impending," and are pivotal in the "qualification of a drama." As such, emotions not only distinguish themselves during these transitions but also evolve as the narrative progresses (Dewey, 1980, p.41).

difficulties. Dewey contends that when an individual becomes vulnerable to new and unpredictable interactions—challenged by others or the environment—they can exercise intelligence, creativity, and practical experimentation. It is by attempting to promote variations in the rhythm of life and facing "conditions of resistance and conflict" that emotions and ideas stir within the self, enabling the qualification of a set of experiences through conscious intent, thus forming a vital experience (Dewey, 1980, p. 35). Amidst these challenging yet vital moments of "taking in" significant experiences, a pleasurable or painful reconstruction of past references and certainties occurs. As a potential outcome, this newfound perception often generates an "urge to express" the identified qualities of this reflexive experience, propelling individuals toward action and communication (Dewey, 1980, p. 51)..

> We now begin (…) to "take in." Perception replaces bare recognition. There is an act of reconstructive doing, and consciousness becomes fresh and alive (…). Recognition is too easy to arouse vivid consciousness. *There is not enough resistance* between new and old to secure consciousness of the experience. (…) Bare recognition is satisfied when a proper tag or label is attached (…). It involves no stir of the organism, no inner commotion. (Dewey, 1980, p.53, my emphasis)

In conclusion, it is crucial to recognize that *vital experiences*—defined by efforts to forge new connections with the world, navigate vulnerabilities and risks, and ultimately fulfill an impulsion—are indispensable not only for basic survival but also for the cognitive, emotional, and practical growth of every form of life. However, these experiences must occur within specific rhythms to be beneficial (Dewey, 1980, p. 20). Dewey conceptualizes these rhythms as the diverse interactions that bring about stability and order amidst the constant flux of change experienced by an organism (Dewey, 1980, p. 22).

Understanding vital experiences as forms of "breathing," marked by a rhythm of intake and output, illuminates the conditions under which these experiences, rather than contributing to an organism's growth, may cause harm. On the one hand, anything that excessively constrains or disrupts this rhythmic "breathing" process—affecting the balance between "undergoing and doing" that characterizes an experience, whether through an excess of action or receptivity—undermines the completion of this process (Dewey, 1980, p. 49). Furthermore, if the variations introduced by experiences are too brief or prolonged, the experience may become "flustered, thin, and confused," or it might fade due to a lack of nourishment (Dewey, 1980, p. 60). Conversely, a "growing life," to be truly "enriched by the state of disparity and resistance it has successfully navigated," needs intervals of rest, pauses, and moments of temporary detachment. Without these pauses, life might persist in a mere existence devoid of genuine flourishing (Dewey, 1980, p. 14).

On the opposite end of the spectrum, it is untenable to cultivate emotions, intelligence, and practical skills in "a world that is finished, ended," resembling a sort of "Nirvana" (Dewey, 1980, p. 23). The rhythm of experiences—balancing the duration of periods of stability and change, action and reflection, engaging and being engaged by the world—is crucial for their significance and for establishing conditions that allow life to grow and thrive without losing aesthetic value. This balance ensures that life is not just a series of events but a meaningful journey characterized by growth, learning, and an enhanced understanding and appreciation of beauty.

> Thus, the non-aesthetic lies within two limits. At one pole is the loose succession that does not begin at any particular place and that ends—in the sense of ceasing—at no particular place. At the other pole is arrest, constriction, proceeding from parts having only a mechanical connection with one another (Dewey, 1980, p.45).

In essence, Dewey's insights emphasize the balance between stability and change, action and reflection, and engagement and detachment as key to vital experiences. By fostering this rhythm, individuals and communities can transform challenges into growth opportunities, enriching their lives. This balance is crucial for democratic innovations, which must combine active participation with reflective pauses, enabling citizens to address collective problems while nurturing their cognitive, emotional, and practical capacities. In essence, Dewey's insights emphasize the balance between stability and change, action and reflection, and engagement and detachment as key to vital experiences. By fostering this rhythm, individuals and communities can transform challenges into growth opportunities, enriching their lives.

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In the previous section, I explored Dewey's conception of democracy and democratic innovations, positioning them not merely as problem-solving tools but as experiential processes that foster citizen growth and sustain genuine democracy (Dewey, 1920, 1939a). However, this section emphasizes that not all experiences encountered by an organism are inherently transformative. For Dewey, lived experiences—political or otherwise—must meet general conditions to become vital. Specifically, such transformation occurs when an organism acts on an impulsion by confronting a balanced rhythm of emotional and cognitive challenges. These challenges, while preserving the organism's integrity, stimulate creativity and reflexivity, enabling experimentation with new ways of relating to the world (Dewey, 1980).

Before advancing a more concrete argument for how Dewey's theoretical framework can serve as a promising lens to interpret the experiential dimensions of democratic innovations—such as our case study, the Global Assembly—it is crucial to address its

limitations. As I will demonstrate, despite being grounded in the lived experiences of organisms, Dewey's theory lacks sufficient sensitivity to the structures and power dynamics that differentially and asymmetrically constrain citizens' opportunities for political participation. These dynamics also limit access to the resources and support necessary for cultivating vital experiences within democratic interactions and innovations. Addressing these limitations could facilitate the dissemination of such transformations across all spheres of social life, thereby enabling democracies to evolve from the bottom up.

1.2 Empowering John Dewey's concepts through vulnerability theory

In this section, I will analyze key criticisms of Dewey's experiential theory of democracy and pragmatism as a whole, with a particular focus on his approach to power relations. I will then discuss Patricia Hill Collins's (2012) suggestions for integrating critical feminist theories with pragmatism to better address the intricate dynamics of power relations in social reality. Following this, I will illustrate how vulnerability theory can strengthen the operationalization of vital experiences by offering theoretical foundations and objective criteria to assess how unequal distributions of precarity in specific contexts generate asymmetrical costs and constraints for different social groups undergoing transformative processes. Finally, before concluding the chapter, I will propose an interpretative framework grounded in the concepts of vital experiences and vulnerabilities to evaluate democratic innovations.

1.2.1 Where is the power? A critique of John Dewey's theory

Hildreth's (2009) comprehensive review of criticisms directed toward Dewey's pragmatism highlights the concept of "pragmatic acquiescence," a critique famously introduced by Lewis Mumford and supported by theorists such as Charles Mills, Max Horkheimer, Antonio Gramsci, and C. Wright Mills. This notion of "pragmatic acquiescence" suggests that while pragmatism provides a significant foundation for an antifoundational theory of knowledge, it falls short in challenging the dominant power structures of contemporary societies. Hildreth outlines three key aspects of this critique:

a) Dewey's optimism about citizens' capacity for intelligent action neglects negative human tendencies, such as the "thirst for power and the willingness to manipulate social relations to one's advantage" (Hildreth, 2009, p. 781).

b) Dewey's focus on public problem-solving, cooperation, and the scientific method is criticized by Mills for inadequately addressing the realities of modern politics and the distribution of power in American society. Mills presents three related arguments: first, that a

model of politics centered on public problem-solving is ineffective against entrenched power hierarchies; second, that the scientific approach to problem-solving overlooks the nature of group conflicts and the need for decisive political action; and third, that Dewey fails to acknowledge the deep structural divisions and value conflicts that shape how different actors perceive public problems (Hildreth, 2009, pp. 784–785).

c) Pragmatism's reluctance to establish independent standards for judging action or inquiry results in actors forming "ends in view" without a robust normative framework. Stephen K. White identifies this as a lack of a hermeneutics of suspicion, which is essential for examining how power structures and inequalities influence the legitimacy of social scientific inquiry. He argues that power relations distort which problems are considered legitimate, obscuring the true interests of actors (Hildreth, 2009, p. 785).

While acknowledging the validity of these criticisms, Hildreth, along with other theorists like Mendonça (2016) and my own review of Dewey's work, argues that it would be inaccurate to claim that Dewey’s theory entirely disregards power. Instead, it is more precise to say that *power is not the central focus of pragmatism*. This distinction is significant because it opens the door to exploring the critical relevance of pragmatism’s valuable concepts. I will present three justifications to support this argument.

First, Dewey’s nuanced understanding of power encompasses both its productive dimensions and its coercive and violent manifestations. He notes that force can become “violence when it defeats or frustrates purpose instead of executing or realizing it” (Dewey, 1916, p. 361). However, his classification of power-related concepts, such as force, coercion, and violence, lacks clarity and is eventually abandoned in his later works (Hildreth, 2009, p. 787). Nevertheless, Dewey is far from naïve, asserting that “any political or legal theory which will have nothing to do with power on the ground [or thinks] that all power is force and all force brutal and non-moral is obviously condemned to a purely sentimental, dreamy morals” (Dewey, 1916, p. 361).

Second, as Hildreth (2009, p. 795) and I have demonstrated, Dewey’s concepts of vital experiences, education, growth, and creative and social democracy reflect normative concerns focused on promoting equality, freedom, development of human beings and the natural environment where our interactions occur. Dewey asserts that “the supreme test of all political institutions and industrial arrangements shall be the contribution they make to the all-around growth of every member of society” (Dewey, 1920. p.186).

A third issue related to the hermeneutics of suspicion critique, as discussed earlier, is the one articulated by Patricia Hill Collins, who also proposes ways to address this limitation and strengthen pragmatist theory.

Collins critiques American pragmatism for its unproblematized, disembodied, and universalistic approach to reality, despite its emphasis on concrete experiences. She argues that pragmatist reasoning "rested on its ability to imagine abstract human beings versus particular female or Black ones, abstract democracy versus the particularities of U.S. democratic politics" (Collins, 2012, p. 445). This critique underscores American pragmatism's failure to fully grapple with the complexities of race, gender, class, sexuality, ethnicity, and nationality, as it adopts a seemingly neutral and universal perspective that oversimplifies concepts such as human beings, experiences, communities, citizens, and democracy. Through a contemporary lens, Dewey's detailed philosophical analysis in works like *Art as Experience* reveals a striking absence of consideration for socio-political identities marked by gender, race, and ethnicity when examining concrete experiences of painting, sculpture, architecture, and drama (Dewey, 1980, p. 31). This abstract approach within pragmatist philosophy yields at least two significant consequences: a) it marginalizes social inequality, power, and politics, rendering them "not principal concerns" despite their implicit presence in the discourse; and b) it results in a lack of "self-reflexivity on its own universalistic assumptions," thereby undermining its effectiveness in addressing the very issues it aims to illuminate (Collins, 2012, p. 445).

Patricia Hill Collins (2012) does not dismiss pragmatism for its lack of focus on power. On the contrary, she acknowledges its valuable insights while arguing that *intersectionality theory* can provide the critical depth necessary to navigate the complexities of power within a pragmatist framework. First, Collins appreciates pragmatism for its "provocative analysis of community" and nuanced understanding of the social self, experience, and the role of symbols (ibid., 2012, p. 453). However, while these elements offer a rich foundation for analyzing social structures, they fall short by not centering social inequality and real-world politics—a gap that intersectionality is uniquely positioned to fill, as "social inequality, power, and politics have been primary concerns of intersectionality since its inception" (ibid., 2012, p. 444).

Moreover, Collins identifies a significant synergy between intersectionality and pragmatism through their shared emphasis on *relationality*, suggesting a rich potential for theoretical complementation. She observes, "Both fields emphasize the relationship among agents in constructing communities" (ibid., 2012, p. 454), laying the groundwork for an integrated approach where pragmatism's analysis of community can be enriched by intersectionality's insights into power dynamics and social inequalities.

To operationalize a pragmatist or cultural naturalistic concept of democratic innovations—where the notion of vital experiences serves as the primary interpretive tool for analyzing the diverse impacts of initiatives like the Global Assembly on its participants—I fully agree with Patricia Hill Collins (2012) that asymmetries of power should be a central concern of our analysis. However, beyond merely incorporating intersectionality into pragmatism's "ready-made set of conceptual tools for advancing arguments about social inequalities," I argue that feminist theories of vulnerability can offer even greater analytical depth. This is particularly due to their natural affinity with the concept of *experience*, as I will demonstrate.

In the next section, I will explore three dimensions in which the theory and concept of vulnerability can enhance our understanding of democratic vital experiences. First, while vulnerability theories recognize our universal potential to affect and be affected—that is, to undergo experiences—they are especially critical in explaining why some organisms are more vulnerable than others and why this matters for democracies. Second, vulnerability theory can help us understand, without losing critical rigor, how the struggles and challenges faced by vulnerable organisms can become principles and tools for collective political participation and "response-abilities." Third, vulnerability theory's concepts of intersectionality and standpoint offer critical epistemological insights to counter pragmatism's tendencies toward universalizing its conceptual propositions. These insights enhance researchers' reflexivity regarding power asymmetries and biases that emerge when representing the experiences and vulnerabilities of others.

1.2.2 We experience because we are all vulnerable, but some are more than others

As previously discussed, Dewey conceptualizes experiences as the ongoing process through which forms of life, and even inanimate entities, engage in "undergoing and doing"—that is, being affected by and affecting each other and their environment (Dewey, 1980, pp. 35, 44). However, Dewey also emphasizes that for these experiences to become significant and transformative vital experiences that foster growth, organisms must balance their "receptivity," or, in my interpretation, their vulnerability to being affected and affecting the world. On one extreme, a world devoid of risks, instabilities, and challenges—akin to "Nirvana"—fails to stimulate creative actions and emotions. On the other extreme, an environment that "excessively constrains" an organism limits its ability to be adequately "fertilized" by vital experiences (Dewey, 1980, pp. 23, 60). But what aspect of the human condition enables this openness to be affected and transformed? And what concrete factors modulate our affectability into harm, injury, or violence?

When we examine how feminist theorists define vulnerability, we find a clear affinity with Dewey's concept of experience, as well as numerous opportunities to expand and refine it. Initially, vulnerability was predominantly viewed in negative terms, associated exclusively with potential harm or injury (Mackenzie, 2014). However, feminist theories have reimagined this inherently negative connotation. For instance, Gilson (2011, p. 310) describes vulnerability as a universal characteristic of our embodied existence, underlying our capacity for "being affected and affecting in turn." In this sense, risk and harm are just one of many possible outcomes of our ontological vulnerability. Similarly, Marques (2018) defines vulnerability as a relational way of being in the world, shaped by our passibility (being affected by events) and our capacity for agency. Over time, the concept has evolved to help us understand why we undergo changes in ourselves in interaction with the world and how those changes are received, whether welcomed or not. From the perspective of vulnerability theory, it is precisely our potential or "susceptibility" to change—our inherent vulnerability to becoming different—that enables us to experience transformations in our biological form and mental life (Fineman, 2012, p. 126; 2019, p. 820). In sum, vulnerability expresses the constant openness of an organism to change while interacting with the world (Fineman, 2019).

Nevertheless, unlike Dewey, vulnerability theorists are particularly concerned with how social, political, and economic factors asymmetrically modulate the ontological vulnerability of certain individuals, groups, or populations into disadvantages, injury, violence, and oppression. For most vulnerability theorists, such as Robert Goodin (1985, p. 191), “Any dependency or vulnerability is arguably created, shaped, or sustained, at least in part, by existing social arrangements. None is wholly natural.” In this sense, while every organism is vulnerable, certain populations and social groups become “more vulnerable than others” (Cole, 2017) in terms of experiencing changes that either enhance or constrain their opportunities to adapt to their environment, persevere in their existence, develop their potential, and grow.

But how do broad-scale sociopolitical modulations of human ontological vulnerability produce distinct and asymmetric vulnerabilities among groups and populations? This question, which ultimately demands empirical investigation, requires consideration of at least four key premises to be adequately addressed:

First, when researchers assert that some populations and social groups are more vulnerable than others, they are not equating ontological vulnerability with actual poverty, inequality, or the potential for injury, oppression, and harm. As Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung (2019, pp. 12, 17–18) explain, poverty and inequality refer to unequal access to socially valued attributes within a population, such as education, income, information, and health, which

act as factors that make some individuals or groups more vulnerable than others. On the other hand, being more vulnerable means that someone is experiencing harm or is at risk of being harmed. To avoid conceptual confusion, theorists like Judith Butler (2009) distinguish between "vulnerability"—as an ontological human condition—and "vulnerabilities" and "precarity"—as the "politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (Butler, 2009, p. 25). I will adopt this distinction in this thesis.

Secondly, when examining vulnerabilities, precarity, and sociopolitical disadvantages—the actual or potential sociopolitical modulations of ontological vulnerability—it is essential to scrutinize not only how power dynamics and mechanisms contribute to their perpetuation but also how the pursuit or maintenance of a fallacious "bubble" of invulnerability, primarily upheld by the most powerful states and social groups, plays a role in these processes.

Patchen Markell (2009, p. 12) argues that the socio-historical (over)valuation and pursuit of "sovereign action" or invulnerability has propagated a problematic model of political autonomy based on the capacity of agents to "assume a posture of confident mastery in the face of the future." This goal is inherently unattainable, as vulnerability is an ontological condition. Nevertheless, it has been used to justify the establishment of social institutions and structures that, as Markell notes, "make it possible for certain people to enjoy an imperfect simulation of the invulnerability they desire" (ibid., 2009, p. 12) by exploiting or marginalizing others. In other words, as W. E. B. Du Bois reflects on slavery, the perverse pursuit of "sovereign action" enacts a dangerous "ontological wage," which refers to the practice of leaving others to bear a disproportionate share of the costs and burdens involved in social life (ibid., 2009, p. 22). Social subordination, therefore, involves "closing off some people's practical possibilities for the sake of other people's sense of mastery or invulnerability" (ibid., 2009, p. 23). Furthermore, Judith Butler contends that the relentless pursuit of invulnerability by the most powerful groups is achieved only through the extraction and denial of resources and support for other groups. This process is justified by the reiteration of "frames" that classify certain lives as worth preserving, in contrast to others that are deemed "ungrievable," disposable, or without value (Butler, 2009, pp. 2, 24).

Third, the primary goal of vulnerability research is to identify the specific risks or potential harms that threaten individuals, groups, or populations.

For instance, Bryan Turner (2008) expanded the definition of vulnerability beyond the potential for physical harm to include psychological, social, and political damage. This broader

definition is grounded in research where he outlined various areas operationalizing the concept of vulnerabilities, such as threats to human rights, natural disasters, computer security, social risks like poverty and epidemics, and health issues such as depression, disabilities, and lifestyle factors like smoking.

Fourth, beyond mapping types of risks, research on the sociopolitical modulations of vulnerability should identify the agents, institutions, or factors with primary responsibilities and obligations in "addressing needs, offering suitable care, reducing harm risks, and preventing exploitation" (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 40). To achieve this, Catriona Mackenzie recommends distinguishing at least three interconnected sources of vulnerability: inherent, situational, and pathogenic.

For Mackenzie (2014, p. 38), *inherent vulnerability* arises from "our embodiment, our inescapable human needs, and our inevitable dependence on others." While this bodily vulnerability is universally shared, its manifestations vary across individuals due to factors such as age, gender, health, and disability. To illustrate, Mackenzie (2014, p. 40) uses the example of a hypothetical asylum seeker, Ali, detained in a detention center. Compared to others in the same situation, the intersection of her ethnicity, physical condition, and mental health must be specifically considered to adequately address her vulnerabilities.

Meanwhile, *situational vulnerability* (Mackenzie, 2014, p. 39) refers to a context-specific modulation of inherent vulnerabilities, which can manifest as either short-term, intermittent, or enduring, depending on varying access to social, political, economic, or environmental factors. Situational vulnerabilities can also be categorized as either dispositional or occurrent. For instance, Mackenzie provides the example of a person who has recently lost their job and thereby becomes situationally vulnerable. However, depending on the context and their skills and qualifications, this enduring situation may be short-lived, requiring different social supports and measures compared to vulnerabilities arising from prolonged unemployment.

Finally, *pathogenic vulnerability* (Mackenzie, 2014, pp. 39–40) refers to morally unacceptable vulnerabilities and dependencies that have yet to be eradicated, including those stemming from prejudice, abuse, social domination, oppression, or political violence. It also highlights unintended consequences, where efforts to mitigate other vulnerabilities may inadvertently intensify or create new forms. For the asylum seeker Ali, this includes the social injustice of political persecution in their home country, compounded by asylum policies in the host country that fail to alleviate—and instead exacerbate—their social and political vulnerabilities. This underscores the need for systemic change to address these deep-rooted

issues. In sum, pathogenic vulnerabilities are distinguished from other situational vulnerabilities by the necessity of structural change to resolve their underlying causes.

1.2.3 The political ambiguity of vulnerabilities: from potential harm to resistance

As I previously considered, vulnerability was initially defined as a concrete propensity to experience physical harm (Forber-Pratt & Zajicek-Farber, 2019, p. 6). However, in recent decades, a transformative re-evaluation of the concept has emerged, focused on combating pathologization, negative preconceptions, and aversion associated with our embodied vulnerability.

Feminist theories have challenged rationalist and liberal political theories that devalue human embodied nature—inevitably emotional, dependent, and vulnerable—by critiquing the ideal of political autonomy as the capacity for rational action free from constraints and independent of others (Mackenzie, 2014). Such discourse overlooks the unjust distribution of care labor, particularly along gendered and racial lines, which enables some social groups to exercise greater choice and political autonomy than others (Biroli, 2018, p. 65). This shift is necessary, among other reasons, to reconstruct a model of the state that legitimizes itself through its obligation to care for its citizens. Furthermore, as I have argued alongside Markel and Butler, recognizing and embracing human vulnerability—without romanticizing it—is crucial to addressing the fallacious pursuit of invulnerability by certain states and socioeconomic groups. These entities unjustly extract and distribute resources, creating social precarity in our societies and strengthening some groups at the expense of others. However, such a project requires a transvaluation of the concept of vulnerability to challenge its negative connotations (e.g., potential to be harmed, dependency, susceptibility to unforeseen changes).

According to Fineman (2019), vulnerability should be reconceptualized as "a primary condition of trans-subjectivity that extends far beyond the potential to be injured." Gilson (2013) argues that vulnerability is not solely about suffering but encompasses "potentiality and ambiguity," necessitating a shift from fixity to potentiality and from negativity to ambiguity. Moreover, Gilson (2013, p. 131) further demonstrates that even if vulnerability is conceptualized as a “passive” characteristic of human interactions, it is an essential “active” condition for learning, communication, and engaging in intersubjective interactions with the world. Without a willingness to be vulnerable, individuals risk isolating themselves within their individuality, hindering their ability to connect and interact meaningfully with others. This active engagement with vulnerability is vital for personal growth and the cultivation of social ties.

Nevertheless, beyond the potential to be affected and to experience intersubjective interactions that enable growth, we must consider at least three generative dimensions of vulnerability to fully grasp the positive differences they can introduce into political interactions.

Firstly, experiences of vulnerability can be *discursively mobilized to address inequalities.* Vulnerability and vulnerabilities do not preclude individuals or groups from engaging in political action and resistance; in certain situations, they can even facilitate it. An example of this reconfiguration of vulnerabilities through democratic innovation can be found in empirical research conducted by Mendonça (2009). The author analyzed the "First National Seminar on the Former Colonies of Hansen's Disease," which brought together individuals affected by leprosy, activists, students, and health experts to discuss the closure of Brazilian colonies for "lepers." Mendonça observed that non-experts, particularly former patients, faced various interactional asymmetries, such as limited influence over the agenda, restricted speaking time, and an imbalance in the composition of discussion groups. However, Mendonça noted that former patients were able to empower their arguments and propositions by grounding their discourse in their lived experiences of leprosy and precarity, often challenging expert viewpoints through their firsthand accounts of vulnerability and hardship (Mendonça, 2009b, p. 219).

Second, vulnerability can also spark political resistance and action when *mobilized as a principle of "response-ability."* This concept, used by Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou (2013, pp. 65–66; 107), highlights how vulnerabilities can serve as a basis for alliances among those facing oppression, enabling collective efforts to counteract violence and injustice. For instance, following the election of far-right president Bolsonaro in Brazil, I had the opportunity to ethnographically observe how the mental health social movement in Belo Horizonte forged alliances with other social groups perceived as more endangered and oppressed by the new government. By recognizing their shared political vulnerabilities, they used the annual mental health day of protest to incorporate multiple racial, gender, and land rights movements and agendas, thereby strengthening the protest and enhancing their collective "response-ability" against the shared risks and threats posed by the far-right government (Veloso, 2022)..

Third, political vulnerabilities can be ambiguously modulated into *scripts, surfaces, and bodily instruments for daring acts of resistance*. Judith Butler (2021) illustrates this possibility in her analysis of the "standing man" protest in Taksim Square, Turkey, during the June 2013 demonstrations against Erdogan's government. Erdem Gündüz, a performance artist, creatively responded to the state's prohibition on assembly and speech by staging a unique and risky protest. Participants stood in a public space at mandated distances, remaining motionless and

silent, thereby technically avoiding the classification of an assembly. This act of resistance, captured through smartphone cameras, simultaneously embodied compliance with the political ban and a bold defiance of state authority. As Judith Butler observes, this performance "had at least two meanings: the ban is shown, incorporated, enacted bodily—the ban becomes a script—but the ban is also opposed, demonstrated against (…). The performance thus both submitted to and defied the interdiction in and through the same action” (Butler, 2021, p. 184)..

1.2.4 Whose vulnerabilities? Standpoints matter

Up to this point, I have indirectly argued how vulnerability can contribute to Dewey's notion of experience, particularly by highlighting that the conditions for experiencing the world are unequal. This inequality concerns not only “inherent vulnerabilities,” as Mackenzie (2014) describes, but also sociopolitical factors that continually shape how actual and potential vulnerabilities—both positive and negative for a living being—are lived. On the other hand, even the most vulnerable and precarious individuals are not passive victims. They possess agency and can actively engage in transformative experiences of political participation and resistance, including by leveraging their vulnerabilities as principles of alliance and “response-ability” (Butler & Athanasiou, 2013). These two general understandings, along with other specific insights, will be fundamental in constructing a sensitive and critical interpretative framework to analyze democratic innovations through the experiences of their participants.

Still, theories of vulnerability, intersectionality, and standpoint epistemology bring yet another crucial lesson to research aimed at understanding the experiences and vulnerabilities of others: the imperative of critically reflecting on and decentralizing researchers' perspectives in knowledge production. This epistemological shift is indispensable for enriching Dewey's concept of vital experiences, particularly given the importance of fully considering how political subjects name, value, and perceive their own vulnerabilities (Cole, 2017)..

As Patricia Hill Collins (2012) elucidates, intersectional knowledge can help pragmatism recognize that individuals' social positions within intersecting power relations have profound epistemological implications. Collins emphasizes that all knowledge, including the very construct of intersectionality itself, is intricately linked to and shaped by the power relations in which it is embedded. In her words, “Individuals and groups are differently positioned within a distinctive matrix of domination, which has implications for how we experience society, including what we know and can imagine, and the material realities that accompany this experience” (Collins, 2012, p. 454).

To critically address the limitations of our experiences and perspectives—always situated at specific points within a “matrix of domination”—Collins suggests the importance of considering “alternative standpoints” about social reality. Doing so allows us to challenge “truth claims advanced by historically powerful social actors” (ibid., p. 455).

The critical points presented above are also relevant for some vulnerability theorists, particularly those concerned with the perverse consequences that can emerge from the one-sided representation of others' vulnerabilities. The political philosopher Alyson Cole (2017) argues that producing taxonomies for vulnerabilities, distinguishing their sociopolitical sources to adequately address the responsibilities for the actual and potential risks and harms experienced by some populations, as discussed by Mackenzie (2014), cannot be considered a final solution. This is because taxonomies created from a researcher’s top-down, monological perspective risk promoting classificatory operations that unilaterally define vulnerable subjects and determine the public policies available to those who meet the criteria, without allowing these individuals the opportunity to name the "wrongs" they experience or identify the support their daily lives require. Moreover, without the critical perspectives of the vulnerable subjects themselves, paternalistic political measures may be proposed as a means of "caring" for the most vulnerable, thereby disregarding their political autonomy and, in effect, exercising control and discipline over their bodies as a prerequisite for accessing public policies.

Even though not offering concrete answers to the methodological-normative problem of representing others' vulnerabilities, Cole (ibid., p.272), in dialogue with the political philosopher Jacques Rancière (1995), points to a possible approach to this problem: considering how (current or potential) vulnerable subjects "name the wrong" that befalls them.

I have been developing a methodological response to this issue for a long time, focusing on ethnographic methodologies and the dialogical construction of knowledge with vulnerable subjects to critique and expand my perspective (Veloso, 2022; Veloso and Marques, 2017; 2018). At the end of the next section, before concluding this chapter, I will briefly justify why I believe that combining the normative and experiential versions of Grounded Theory methodology can help to mitigate the representational problems detected above and to critically operationalize the concepts of vital experiences and vulnerabilities for the analysis of Global Assembly.

1.3 Experience and vulnerability: Sketching an interpretative framework for democratic innovations

The primary aim of this thesis is to explore the transformative experiences that the Global Assembly on Climate and Ecological Crisis provided to its participants. To develop an interpretative framework for this analysis, this chapter first examines John Dewey's experiential and creative theory of democracy. It then integrates three key insights from vulnerability theory to enhance the critical relevance of Dewey's concepts for the case study. Building on these foundations, I will now outline a critical interpretative framework based on the previously discussed concepts of experience and vulnerability, setting the stage for the subsequent chapters.

First, drawing on Dewey's theory, I consider the importance of studying citizens' political experiences for democracy. On one level, Dewey views democracies as collective endeavors that seek to coordinate various associations of citizens or publics with political representatives to address concrete problems that directly impact their lives (Dewey, 1946). However, beyond the effectiveness of solutions, the true value of this ongoing problem-solving process lies in the transformations it fosters among the participating citizens. This is because, for democracies to endure and evolve, a vibrant democratic way of life must be cultivated by citizens across all spheres of society, as democracy “cannot stand in isolation. It must be supported by the presence of democratic methods in all social relationships” (Dewey, 1939a, p. 225). For Dewey, this can only be achieved when citizens develop specific political, cognitive, and emotional capacities, as well as social bonds, while being given opportunities to engage, collaborate, and experiment with projects and practices aimed at addressing the issues that affect them (Dewey, 1920, 1939a).

In summary, from a Deweyan perspective, the study of democratic innovations cannot be confined to evaluating the quality and effectiveness of the solutions they generate for collective problems. It is equally essential to consider the types of democratic transformations these innovations enable citizens to experience. This is because, as Dewey (1980) argues, not all experiences an individual undergoes—whether within a democratic innovation or otherwise—are genuinely transformative or "vital."

In this thesis, transformative or vital democratic experiences are understood as a set of political interactions that become cognitively and emotionally significant to an individual, to the extent that they trigger a "reconstruction" of the mechanical or habitual ways in which one perceives, interprets, and engages in democratic relations with the world (Dewey, 1980, p. 36). While democracy remains an inherently contested concept (Dahl, 2000, p. 37), democratic

relations can be defined as interactions that, to some degree and often ambiguously, foster relationships—such as respect, responsibility, care, accountability, and transparency—that enhance the experience of political equality between at least two social entities or beings.

The following table summarizes the conditions Dewey outlines for such a transformative process to occur. These conditions have guided this thesis's interpretation of the transformative democratic potential of the Global Assembly in the lives of its participants:

<table>
<tr><th colspan="4">Conditions for Vital Experiences</th></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="4">Structures or patterns of vital experiences</td><td>Impulsion</td><td>The organism's outward and forward movement is driven by a profound need to establish new relationships with others and the environment.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Fulfillment</td><td>The impulsion's completion or satisfaction establishes new relationships with the environment.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Variation</td><td>The production of a variation in the rhythm of life involves challenging established habits and conditions.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Struggle & Vulnerability</td><td>Facing resistance and conflict during interactions leads to emotional and reflective processes.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="8">Obstacles to Vital Experiences</td><td rowspan="4">Environmental and Rhythmic Challenges:</td><td>Excessive Constraints</td><td>Overly restrictive environments hinder the possibility of establishing new relationships with the world or even harm the organism.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Disruptions in Rhythm</td><td>Interruptions in the flow of experiences affect its development and completeness.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Imbalance between Action and Receptivity</td><td>Unilateral or unequal engagement hinders the potential of an experience to be positively remarkable;</td></tr>
<tr><td>Arrest or Constriction</td><td>Mechanically connected or constrained experiences limit growth and engagement.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Temporal Challenges:</td><td>Brief or Prolonged Variations</td><td>Short-lived or extended changes lead to confusion or shallowness.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Absence of Rest or Pauses</td><td>Lack of breaks impeding genuine flourishing and growth.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Unfinished Experiences</td><td>Loose or prematurely terminated experiences hinder learning and development.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Aesthetic Significance</td><td>Lack of Aesthetic Value:</td><td>Inability to cultivate emotions, intelligence, and practical skills hindering aesthetic value and genuine growth.</td></tr>
</table>

	and Coherence:	Coherence:	The completeness and coherence of experiences contribute to meaningful growth and learning.

Indicative of a vital experience	Emotional and Reflective Reconstruction	The emotions aroused by a vital experience refer to the singularization and signification of a particular experience.
		A vital experience is expected to promote reflexivity on the self and challenge past references and certainties.

Table 1: Dimensions and characteristics for operationalizing the concept of “vital experience.” Source: Author.

On the other hand, Dewey’s promising concepts in his experiential and creative theory of democracies are criticized for supposedly "acquiescing" to existing power structures and relations (e.g., Hildreth, 2009). Drawing inspiration from Patricia Hill Collins's (2012) reflections on pragmatism, I have linked Dewey's notions of experience and democratic vital experience with key ideas from contemporary feminist theories of vulnerability to address this critique.

Three propositions of vulnerability theory can enhance the critical sensitivity of Dewey's concept of vital experiences and, consequently, raise its awareness of how structural inequalities and power relations introduce differences in the process of being democratically transformed by innovations like the Global Assembly, the case study of this thesis.

First, we need to consider how the “inherent” bodily and personal vulnerabilities of citizens (e.g., age, formal education, financial situation), as Mackenzie (2014) puts it, interact with the design and demands of democratic innovations in an ambiguous manner, potentially generating either opportunities to live empowering democratic vital experiences and undesired asymmetric political asymmetries, disadvantages, and harm to citizens.

As Dewey (1980) explains, experiences are ongoing interactions where individuals affect and are affected by their environment. For these experiences to be transformative or "vital," they must balance receptivity and the capacity to act, avoiding extremes of stability or excessive constraint. Dewey emphasizes that environments that are too devoid of challenges or overly restrictive hinder growth. Vulnerability theory complements Dewey's ideas by highlighting that our inherent susceptibility to change underpins our ability to transform democratically. However, the asymmetries and disadvantages that different populations experience in this process are a sociopolitical problem, as they can lead, even in a designed democratic environment, to disadvantages and harm for certain groups (Goodin, 1985; Butler, 2009). Consider how gender introduces differences in women's opportunities to participate politically. Even in a citizen assembly environment designed to promote inclusion and parity

of participation, women tend to face more constraints in presenting propositions and being politically considered in comparison to men (Gerber, 2019).

Second, even citizens who experience disadvantage or harm as a result of political processes or democratic innovations can, to some extent, develop improvised resilience practices. These unforeseen adaptations can, in turn, contribute to the emergence of new cognitive, emotional, and practical capacities that were not anticipated in the original design of the democratic innovation. Learning from these adaptations is crucial for future research, particularly in designing and implementing new democratic innovations.

Moving beyond the notion of vulnerabilities as mere pathologies—and the vulnerable subject as a passive victim—is essential. Once primarily understood as a propensity for physical harm, vulnerability has been re-evaluated to highlight its transformative potential (Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung, 2020). Feminist theories emphasize that political autonomy requires acknowledging our emotional, interdependent, and vulnerable nature. As argued in this chapter, vulnerabilities can drive political resistance and innovation (Mendonça, 2009; Butler & Athanasiou, 2013; Veloso, 2022).

In sum, without romanticizing vulnerability, embracing it as a source of resilience and agency allows us to uncover new ways for citizens to learn, grow, and challenge democratic innovations through various forms of “response-ability.” In this thesis, response-abilities[11] refer to acts of relational resistance and resilience, through which subjects navigate challenging or adverse experiences of vulnerability, potentially transforming them into vital experiences.

Third, to mitigate asymmetries in perspective, biases, and power relations between researchers and research subjects, it is essential to consider the perspectives of citizens who have directly experienced democratic innovations, including their participatory vital experiences and vulnerabilities.

Vulnerability theory emphasizes that experiences are shaped by both inherent and sociopolitical factors (Mackenzie, 2014). Recognizing how individuals name and describe their own experiences and vulnerabilities is crucial, as it reveals how they navigate and resist these challenges (Butler, 2009, 2021). This perspective ensures that democratic innovations are analyzed through the lived realities of participants rather than solely through top-down classifications. By centering on how political subjects articulate and interpret their experiences,

[11] A definition of response-ability more aligned wih Butler and Athanasiou (2013, p. 65-66) would be a practice of the self, always in "relational sociality and affectability," that establishes new relationships with the world when confronted with "violent misrecognition," creating a "contingent rupture" that challenges or mitigates the vulnerabilities imposed by existing sociopolitical structures.

researchers can better capture the complexities of democratic innovations and ensure that these processes genuinely reflect and address participants’ realities (Cole, 2017; Rancière, 1995).

In Chapter Three, I outline the methodology used to translate these conceptual propositions into a grounded and critical analysis of the vital experiences and vulnerabilities that emerged in the Global Assembly (GA). This approach seeks to uncover the conditions of their emergence and the diverse ways they manifested. The primary strategy for data generation involved conducting in-depth interviews with participants most likely to experience vulnerability—specifically, citizens from the Global South. Additionally, I conducted supplementary interviews with regional collaborators and GA organizers to broaden my perspective.

Guided by Grounded Normative Theory (Ackerly et al., 2021), I adhered to four core commitments in generating reflective and meaningful data with research subjects: comprehensiveness, recursivity, attentiveness to epistemological inclusion, and epistemic accountability. Beyond prioritizing detailed description and normative analysis, this framework also centers participants' perspectives while challenging my own biases and initial assumptions about vulnerability. Ultimately, it allowed me to construct a grounded account rooted in the experiences and concepts that participants themselves valued.

On the other hand, in the data analysis, Grounded Experiential Theory (Charmaz, 2006; Morse et al., 2021) provided systematic methods for reconstructing the lived experiences narrated by research subjects. Through line-by-line coding and constant comparison, I analyzed the data to identify vital and transformative experiences, examine the factors influencing their occurrence, and recognize both the vulnerabilities and instances of creative resilience faced by the interviewees. This methodology enabled me to theorize from the participants' perspectives, ensuring that their voices and experiences shaped the analysis.

In sum, beyond the key methodological propositions outlined above, and particularly drawing on the work of Judith Butler (2009, 2015, 2021), I conceptualize vulnerability as a bodily ontological condition inherent to human beings—one that underpins our capacity to affect and be affected by the world, to experience, and to transform. However, depending on the asymmetric networks of support and care that individuals can access, this primary vulnerability can be shaped into different forms of vulnerability, which may limit opportunities for growth and development.

In this sense, this thesis employs the concept of political vulnerabilities to describe the consequences of interactions between social actors, environments, and sociopolitical factors that

create unequal disadvantages, constraints, or harms, ultimately hindering citizens' opportunities to experience transformative democratic engagement.

* * *

Having introduced the concepts of *vital democratic experiences* and *political vulnerabilities*, along with an interpretative framework to guide their analysis within democratic innovations, I sought to understand how my propositions align with and diverge from the existing literature on democratic innovations.

Through an extensive review, I found that theorists and practitioners have already put forward various perspectives on the political vulnerabilities that democratic innovations should address and the ideal transformative experiences they should foster to achieve their objectives. In the next chapter, I will examine these differing theoretical viewpoints, which have been essential in refining my perspective and analytical tools for studying the Global Assembly, the case study of this thesis.

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2. DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS THROUGH THE LENSES OF EXPERIENCE AND VULNERABILITY

In the previous chapter, I examined, through John Dewey's (1920, 1939, 1946, 1980) theory, why studying and fostering citizens' transformative democratic experiences is fundamentally important for democracies. Alongside theories of vulnerability (Goodin, 1985; Butler, 2009, 2016, 2021; Mackenzie, 2014; Cole, 2017), I introduced the concept of political vulnerabilities as a tool to enhance the power sensitivity of an experiential framework, enabling a critical assessment of the conditions under which different citizens can undergo transformative democratic experiences. However, given the case study that motivates this thesis—the Global Citizen Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis—it was necessary to bridge these concepts with the existing literature on democratic innovations and citizen assemblies.

When examining the extensive literature on democratic innovations through the lenses of experience and vulnerability, I identified a key question for this thesis. Theorists often, albeit implicitly, present varied and distinct understandings of the types of citizen vulnerabilities that democratic innovations should ideally address, as well as the kinds of transformative experiences they should foster to tackle collective problems and revitalize democracies. This variation arises because, although the most common use of the term refers to practices or processes that expand citizens' political roles beyond voting in sporadic elections (Stewart, 1996; Avritzer, 2002; Smith, 2009; Newton, 2012; Elstub and Escobar, 2019), the concept and practice of democratic innovation lack a universal definition.

This chapter presents the results of an analytical literature review aimed at understanding not only how the concept of democratic innovation varies in its definitions within academic literature but also how implicit propositions regarding ideal citizen participatory experiences and political vulnerabilities can be identified within these diverse definitions. Consequently, it is more precise to discuss democratic innovations in this chapter. To conduct this study, I followed these steps.

Firstly, I conducted a structured review of the international literature on democratic innovations. This involved not only examining the most recognized works that explicitly discuss the concept of democratic innovation in Brazil (e.g., Avritzer, 2002, 2010; Dagnino, 2002; Pereira, 2003; Lavalle et al., 2006; Almeida & Tatagiba, 2012; Freitas et al., 2022; Mendonça et al., 2023) and globally (e.g., Saward, 2003; Fung & Wright, 2003; Smith, 2005, 2009; Goodin, 2008; Newton, 2012; Curato & Böker, 2016; Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Della Porta, 2020; Geissel, 2023), but also identifying the most frequently cited publications on

Google Scholar using the Publish or Perish software. To do so, I searched for the keywords "democratic innovation," "democratic innovations," "inovações democráticas," and "instituições participativas."

This approach enabled me to examine more than 60 book chapters and academic papers that engage with the concept of democratic innovation(s). Within this dataset, I focused on identifying differences in definitions and empirical applications of the notion, including perspectives that are less frequently referenced, such as public administration (e.g., Lenart-Gansiniec, 2021) and agonistic theories (e.g., Björgvinsson, 2012), to achieve a more comprehensive overview. Additionally, given my specific case study, I investigated how the concept of citizens' assemblies—considered a particular type of democratic innovation—varies in its definitions and research agendas.

This chapter begins by presenting how I categorized various definitions of democratic innovations into conceptual sets that share similar characteristics, making their external and internal variability easier to grasp. As a first outcome, I identified three distinct yet comprehensive approaches to democratic innovations, each differing in the emphasis placed on their capacity to generate: a) historical ruptures in aristocratic or oligarchic political regimes to establish democracy; b) reforms within representative democracies; c) contestation of representative democracies and broader hegemonic social structures, such as capitalism. Since the first approach is primarily confined to studies on democratization processes in Latin America[12], which are less directly relevant to my case study, I focused my analysis on the other two approaches.

As I will demonstrate, the boundaries between the reformist and critical approaches to democratic innovations are somewhat fluid. Both perspectives share two fundamental understandings. First, citizens in democracies are politically vulnerable to elected

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[12] Avritzer (2002,p.5) explicitly employs the term "innovation" to point to the progressive expansion of citizen democratic participation in Brazil, marking a significant departure from the historical control of the Brazilian government and politics by elites and military dictatorship: "I will argue that democratization is the result of transformations at the public level and that full democratization is the capacity to transform new practices from a societal innovation into a public form of decision-making". From the colonial era to the Old Republic, Brazil's political landscape was characterized by elite control, resulting in a disconnect between the government and most of the population. However, beginning in the 1930s with the emergence of trade unions and urbanization, there was a growing push for the incorporation of the masses into the political process (Moises, 1990). The military dictatorship suppressed popular participation, but change started in the mid-1970s with the emergence of non-corporate associations, political party reorganization, and a call for new rights and avenues for participation (Santos, 1986). The subsequent decades witnessed increased pressure for mass inclusion, culminating in the transformative 1988 Constitution, which introduced various participatory mechanisms and expanded suffrage. This period marked the emergence of various democratic innovations, such as Public Policy Councils and Participatory Budgeting, making Brazil a laboratory for deepening democracy through constitutional reforms, social movements, and political innovations (Dagnino, 2004; Nobre, 2004).

representatives and existing institutions that make decisions on their behalf. Second, they cannot mitigate these political vulnerabilities without opportunities to experience a shift in how they introduce differences in political decision-making.

Nevertheless, when examining how these approaches propose to transform the relationships citizens establish with democracies to mitigate their political vulnerabilities to representatives' decision-making, significant variations emerge. These range from broad and ambiguous definitions that treat all citizen participatory experiences as equally important to more restrictive propositions that argue meaningful participatory experiences must adhere to specific values and produce concrete outcomes to qualify as effective democratic innovations.

After exploring the nuances of the distinct approaches to democratic innovations identified in my literature review, I will turn to how researchers define the concept and research agendas of a specific type of democratic innovation: citizens' assemblies. To do so, I will transition from Robert Dahl’s (1989) hypothetical definition of a *minipopulus* to the broader contemporary understanding found in the recent *Handbook of Citizens’ Assemblies* (Reuchamps et al., 2023), which aligns more closely with the reformist strand of deliberative democracy and specifies the kinds of transformative experiences citizens should undergo in democratic innovations. Following this analysis, I will examine the key challenges associated with citizens' assemblies, highlighting how researchers have expressed concerns that, despite their sophisticated design and good intentions, these assemblies may inadvertently heighten citizens' *political vulnerabilities* (Rountree and Curato, 2021; Lafont, 2023).

2.1 Experience and vulnerability in distinct approaches to democratic innovations

Since the 2000s, the concept of democratic innovation(s) has seen a remarkable expansion in political theory and political science (Leidner, 1991; Stewart, 1996; Abers, 2021; Avritzer, 2002; Fung & Wright, 2003; Saward, 2003; Smith, 2005, 2009; Goodin, 2008; Mendonça, 2009; Cunha et al., 2011; Almeida & Tatagiba, 2012; Warren, 2009; Newton, 2012; Fishkin, 2012; Hendriks, 2019; Elstub & Escobar, 2019; Freitas et al., 2022; Mendonça et al., 2023).

One reason for the increasing use and success of the concept of democratic innovation is its role in framing a wave of changes in how democracies are perceived and practiced worldwide. In Brazil, for instance, the term *democratic innovation* is often used interchangeably with or as a synonym for *instituições participativas* (IPs) or *participatory institutions* (PIs). This is not coincidental. According to data collected by Avritzer (2009), by 2004, more than 400,000 citizens had participated in Conferences and Councils of Public Policies in areas such

as health and social assistance. Additionally, over 300,000 people were engaged in institutions and events related to Participatory Budgeting. This is not to mention the numerous extra-institutional mechanisms and citizen-led initiatives promoted by social movements and activists, who have made diverse contributions to democratizing the country since the 1970s (Santos, 1986; Avritzer, 2002).

Another reason why the concept of democratic innovation resonates so strongly in Western societies is its historical association with natural science and the ideas of *discovery* and *invention* (e.g., Stengers, 2010). In these contexts, innovation is often linked to something unforeseen or novel that efficiently and effectively addresses specific problems or broader aspects of human life. Not coincidentally, *innovation* serves as a positive label in promoting human projects, artifacts, and practices, as it is generally seen as a hallmark of rational progress.

However, scholars such as Newton (2012) remind us that both the definition and practice of democratic innovations are far from consensual. First, democracy itself is an *inherently contested* concept, meaning that values and expectations regarding *what*, *how*, *when*, and *why* innovation should occur vary depending on different theoretical and ideological perspectives. Second, even if a more stable definition existed, human phenomena and processes do not operate like innovations in the natural sciences, where, for instance, "the internal combustion engine works irrespective of the country, its social conditions, and its political and economic climate" (Newton, 2012, p. 14). In this regard, Newton (2012, p. 5) is emphatic in stating that what definitions of democratic innovation present as necessary to "preserve, improve, transform, or subvert" is ultimately "a matter of opinion."

Despite Newton's (2012) considerations, I must disagree with the view that political concepts are merely "matters of opinion." First, from a political perspective, concepts are not just labels used to describe reality; they are historical devices that mediate our experience of the world. In this sense, they play a crucial role in emphasizing certain values and qualities while downplaying others, ultimately shaping how we define, value, and hierarchize what is perceptible—an argument echoed by thinkers such as Rancière (1995) and Butler (2009).

Second, from a methodological standpoint, the validity of quantitative or qualitative measurements and interpretations is often determined by how well they "meaningfully capture the ideas contained in the corresponding concept" (e.g., Adcock & Collier, 2001, p. 530). Even minor differences in concept definitions can necessitate distinct methods for empirical operationalization. Consequently, it is essential to consider these variations to manage our expectations regarding what a concept enables us to perceive or achieve in the

world. Although drawing conceptual boundaries is always challenging due to inevitable overlaps, engaging with these distinctions remains a necessary endeavor.

2.1.1 Innovation as a means to reform representative democracies

Almost all the publications reviewed consider democratic innovations as a response to some form of “disillusionment” (Smith, 2009), “deficit” (Warren, 2009), “recession” (Elstub & Escobar, 2019), “stagnation” (Tambakaki, 2017), “erosion” (Fominaya, 2021), “malady” (Newton, 2012), or “crisis” (Ercan & Gagnon, 2014) that contemporary representative democracies are facing. This perspective does not preclude other concurrent views, such as the idea that democratic innovations emerge from an inevitable process of human and societal transformation (e.g., Saward, 2003). Not surprisingly, most of the works reviewed regard democratic innovations as necessary for reforming or enhancing existing representative democracies.

In sum, political theorists largely agree that both democracies and citizens face distinct political vulnerabilities, many of which democratic innovations have the potential to address. However, despite this broad consensus, definitions of democratic innovation vary significantly depending on differing perspectives about *what* innovations should achieve, *where* they should occur, and *how* they should be implemented—whether to "cure," "rejuvenate," "reinvigorate," or even "challenge" existing representative democracies. This raises important questions: Which specific vulnerabilities do individual theorists emphasize, and what kind of transformative change do they propose to achieve through democratic innovations?

Almost all the publications considered in this literature review present democratic innovations as a means to address some form of “disillusionment” (Smith, 2009), “deficit” (Warren, 2009), “recession” (Elstub & Escobar, 2019), “stagnation” (Tambakaki, 2017), “erosion” (Fominaya, 2021), “malady” (Newton, 2012), or “crisis” (Ercan & Gagnon, 2014) facing contemporary representative democracies. This perspective does not preclude other concurrent views, such as the idea that democratic innovations emerge as part of an inevitable process of human and societal transformation (e.g., Saward, 2003). Not surprisingly, most of the works reviewed regard democratic innovations as necessary for reforming or enhancing existing representative democracies.

Despite this broad consensus, variations in how democratic innovation is conceptualized stem from differing perspectives on what, where, and how innovation should occur to “cure,” “rejuvenate,” “reinvigorate,” or “challenge” representative democracies. In this sense, it seems reasonable to interpret that democratic innovation theorists, at the very least,

aim to address some of the political vulnerabilities that citizens face in contemporary democracies. But which specific vulnerabilities does each theorist emphasize, and what kind of transformative experience do they propose to create through democratic innovations?

To explore these differences, I categorize democratic innovation approaches using the "top-down" and "bottom-up" labels, as famously classified by Smith (2005). However, I use these terms primarily as heuristic tools rather than as rigid categories. In reality, the boundaries between these approaches are fluid, and many democratic innovations exhibit characteristics of both. While the top-down label generally applies to innovations led by politicians and technocrats to enhance institutional capacity for delivering policies, public services, and accountability, my research suggests this is not always the case. These approaches can also include institutional reforms driven by the creative initiatives and improvisations of civil servants, activists, or even ordinary citizens engaging in horizontal or decentralized governmental processes (Newton, 2012, p. 22).

At the same time, while top-down democratic innovations aim to strengthen representative democracies and improve public goods, they typically do not seek to expand citizens' roles in decision-making, particularly for those who are systematically disengaged from the political process (Smith, 2009, p. 3). This contrasts with bottom-up approaches, which emphasize citizen agency and the redistribution of decision-making power (e.g.,, Fung and Wright, 2003). Nonetheless, in practice, the distinction between these two is not always clear-cut—many democratic innovations combine elements of both, depending on their context, objectives, and institutional design.

In sum, following Smith (2005), my use of these categories should be understood as a modest attempt to structure conceptual differences for analytical clarity rather than as a claim that these are mutually exclusive or sharply divided perspectives. In reality, democratic innovation concepts exhibit more intersections and overlaps than rigid distinctions.

a) Top-down democratic innovations

Within the broad body of literature that frames democratic innovation as a positive intervention in representative democracies, a significant portion focuses on reshaping both tangible indicators and citizens' perceptions of the "responsiveness" and "accountability" of political institutions. These innovations aim to address citizens' vulnerability to ineffective governance, which arises from the state and public servants' inability—or constraints—to tackle increasingly complex social issues, deliver goods and services efficiently, and maintain

transparent communication channels. Such shortcomings are widely identified as key drivers of citizen discontent with democracies (Plessis, 2007; Warren, 2009; Lenart-Gansiniec, 2021).

Since 1995, *The Public Sector Innovation Journal* has been a prominent platform for academic research on innovations aimed at enhancing the responsiveness and efficiency of democratic governments and political institutions. A frequently cited definition from OECD/Eurostat (2018, p. 60), which appears in numerous publications from the journal, characterizes democratic innovations as "a new or improved product or process (or combination thereof)" that is either "made available to potential users (product)" or "implemented by the unit (process)." Many publications in this journal employ management and market-oriented language to describe governmental democratic innovation, often framing citizens as the ultimate consumers of improved products or processes. In this context, innovations are typically presented as efforts to reduce costs and enhance the quality of public services delivered to citizens (e.g., Plessis, 2007; Wong et al., 2008).

A growing trend in the field emphasizes empowering citizens as "co-producers" of public services, particularly through mechanisms that gather their opinions and perspectives (e.g., Bovaird, 2007; Josh and Moore, 2014). Despite this shift, the foundational language and primary focus of these publications largely reiterate a framework that treats governmental innovation as a tool for addressing market and management challenges in public service delivery. Beyond the tangible benefits these services provide to society, such democratic innovations are understood to have the potential to reshape citizens' perceptions of the value and importance of democratic states and institutions, thereby fostering greater support for them. In essence, this type of democratic innovation seeks to provide citizens with tangible experiences that reinforce their sense of being effectively governed, thereby mitigating their political vulnerability to ineffective governance by the state and civil servants.

On the other hand, when analyzing how democratic innovations are conceptualized in publications that prioritize institutional accountability over responsiveness, the dominant language centers on "governmental engineering." Newton (2012, p. 22) identifies two primary research directions in this area. The first focuses on "horizontal accountability," examining how institutions can strengthen checks and balances—for example, by enhancing parliamentary oversight of the executive, establishing independent central banks, and reforming public management systems. The second direction emphasizes "vertical accountability," proposing reforms or updates to key aspects of representative democracy, such as electoral systems and institutional transparency mechanisms. These innovations aim to address citizens' vulnerability to inadequate accountability by ensuring that governmental actions are subject to rigorous

oversight and transparency. For instance, some studies apply the concept of democratic innovation to explore the role of new digital communication technologies as "administration-citizen interfaces." These innovations seek to provide citizens with political experiences in which they are adequately informed about governmental actions and projects, while also facilitating their interaction with the state. By doing so, they aim to enhance citizens' sense of governmental accountability and their perception of its legitimacy (Subirats, 2002, p. 237).

We encounter yet another top-down approach to conceptualizing democratic innovations. In this framework, the vulnerabilities citizens face regarding ineffective governance and accountability are addressed by fostering new forms of interaction between citizens and civil servants, moving beyond the traditional model where these actors are merely providers and consumers of policies and public services. Warren (2009, p. 4) introduces the concept of "governance-driven democratization," arguing that institutional innovations designed to address government deficiencies in managing social issues and policy development can, as a secondary outcome, "enhance the opportunities for those potentially impacted by collective decisions to exert influence over those decisions." This approach seeks to transform citizens' experiences by granting them greater influence over decision-making processes, thereby mitigating their vulnerability to ineffective governance and accountability.

Numerous studies in Brazil corroborate and expand on Warren`s proposition. For example, Abers (2021) and Abers et al. (2014) demonstrate that activists and social movements often assume bureaucratic roles, using their positions to forge new connections between civil society's demands and the policymaking process. They emphasize that the creation of novel "repertoires of interaction" between the state and civil society is facilitated through "institutional activism" within the government apparatus. This form of innovation frequently leads to the formulation and implementation of public policies rooted in non-hegemonic values—values that might not align with the preferences of elected representatives. As a result, it enhances the state's responsiveness and accountability to its citizens by transforming the roles of activists and public servants, enabling them to act as bridges between civil society and the state. Examples of this type of democratic innovation include Oliveira's (2016) study on environmentalists in federal governments and Dowbor's (2012) research on how the sanitary workers' movement contributed to the creation of Brazil's universal public health system (SUS).

The first work to explicitly operationalize the concept of democratic innovation, authored by Robin Leidner in 1991, also falls under the category of highly activist democratic innovation. Leidner (1991, p. 263) coined the term in a case study on a "democratic innovation

in a feminist organization": the National Women's Studies Association (NWSA). While not providing an elaborate definition, she posited that "structural innovations" reflect a "predisposition" of certain groups and organizations, such as feminists, to develop new organizational forms that embody their values. In this case, she discusses how the NWSA promoted an "organizational innovation" in its representation system, transitioning from a "one person/one vote" model to a form of representation that acknowledges internal differences within the category of "woman" and promotes self-identified group representation. This innovation transforms the political experience of members by integrating both liberal and corporatist elements of governance, fostering a more inclusive and representative decision-making process (Leidner, 1991, pp. 263–265).

Concept/Approach	Citizen Vulnerabilities Addressed	Idealized Transformative Political Experiences Advanced
Governmental Innovation for Responsiveness	Ineffective governance	Enhancing citizens' sense of being effectively governed by improving public service delivery and engaging citizens as "co-producers" of public services
Governmental Engineering	Inadequate accountability	Creating new mechanisms for "horizontal accountability" (e.g., checks and balances, parliamentary oversight) and "vertical accountability" (e.g., electoral reforms, transparency devices) that inform citizens about governmental actions and facilitate interaction
Governance-Driven Democratization and Institutional Activism	Ineffective governance and accountability; Lack of connection in decision-making	Providing citizens with greater influence over decision-making processes, enabling activists and social movements to assume bureaucratic roles to bridge civil society and policymaking, and promoting channels for enhanced representation and dialogue with public servants who can advocate for citizens within the state

Table 2: Vulnerability and Experience in Top-down Concepts of Democratic Innovation. Source: Author.

b) Bottom-up democratic innovations

The literature review reveals that the most common definitions of democratic innovations propose expanding citizens' democratic roles beyond merely voting in regular elections and consuming public policies as the most effective remedy for the political vulnerabilities they face in contemporary representative democracies. To grasp the academic breadth and significance of this citizen-centered, or bottom-up, approach to democratic innovations, one can turn to Geisel's work (2012, p. 234). The researcher noted that this conceptualization alone encompasses approximately 500 academic publications on European citizen participatory events, considering only those available up to 2006. In my literature review, I identified at least 100 works with more than ten citations on Google Scholar that also adopt this definition.

However, scholars differ significantly in defining *how*, *what*, and *where* ordinary citizens should experience new political roles in democracies to address the vulnerabilities imposed by representative systems. These disparities are not solely attributable to the inherently contested nature of democracy, as Newton (2012) suggested, but also stem from divergent interpretations of the term “innovation” itself.

Within the bottom-up approach to democratic innovations, a significant group of scholars adopts a more flexible and inclusive definition. In essence, they argue that any citizen participatory experience that broadens engagement in democracy beyond elections can be considered a democratic innovation. While the vagueness of these definitions may raise concerns, I contend that such conceptualizations are not inherently problematic, as I will elaborate later.

Prominent examples of this broad conceptualization can be found in Brazilian political theory. For instance, Lavalle and colleagues (2006, p. 84) define “participatory innovations” as “unprecedented processes of institutional experimentation” capable of “enlightening the path for democracy reform” by fostering the “diversification of actors” and the “expansion of the arenas” where political representation occurs. In this framework, any approach that promotes the diversification of political actors and arenas can be considered a democratic innovation, as bringing “light” to democratic reform is an outcome achievable through a wide range of practices and processes.

More recently, Freitas et al. (2022, pp. 11–12) have introduced a comprehensive yet nuanced definition of democratic innovation. They define the concept as “any initiative or process aimed at citizen participation and the enhancement of democracy,” emphasizing that any practice, procedure, or technical strategy can serve this purpose. However, they specify an expectation that democratic innovations should at least contribute to developing citizens’ capabilities or fostering “new forms of citizenship.” Notably, as Geissel (2012, p. 303) observes, cultivating citizen capacities is one of the most widely shared expectations within democratic innovation concepts. Yet, Freitas et al. (2022) and many other studies do not outline specific practical requirements for achieving this broader goal.

Despite the conceptual stretching observed in these flexible, bottom-up definitions, they remain incredibly valuable. They enable researchers to uncover hidden experimentations and creative practices that can breathe new life into democracies. Unsurprisingly, this conceptualization is widely adopted in academic research on grassroots activism and social movements. For instance, Avritzer (2002, p. 17) argues that social movements often challenge and expand the prevailing “social grammar,” introducing innovative concepts—such as “the

right to have rights"—that can be embraced by the public and promote significant democratic advances. Similarly, Della Porta (2020, pp. 13, 22) explores how democratic innovations within social movements serve as a "prefiguration of alternative forms of internal democracy," addressing contemporary political challenges and revitalizing conventional citizen participation mechanisms, as seen in practices like "referendums from below."

Furthermore, Mendonça and colleagues (2023) examine the rise of collective mandates in Brazil, which challenge the country's electoral system that traditionally elects only one representative per vote. They describe this unstructured democratic innovation, or political "gambiarras," as a "quick fix" to address pressing issues within representative democracy, such as the underrepresentation of women and minorities.

The notion that *any* citizen participatory experience serves as a panacea for democratic maladies is increasingly being questioned today. As contemporary alt-right movements demonstrate, "democracy can also erode with massive and fervent popular support" (Mendonça and Rodrigues, 2021, p. 3). Not coincidentally, another strand of bottom-up definitions of democratic innovation was, historically, proposing a narrower approach. These conceptualizations recognize that citizens face political vulnerabilities beyond a mere lack of participation opportunities, including the social and political quality of their daily interactions and their capacity to understand and address complex societal problems.

Conceptualizations of democratic innovation, particularly those shaped by deliberative democracy[13], emphasize fostering citizen participation to address political vulnerabilities in societal decision-making and enhance the democratic, ethical, and epistemic qualities of political preferences and projects circulating within the public sphere. In Saward's definition (2003, pp. 4-5), for example, there is complete openness regarding what constitutes an innovation, which may include "revived and adapted older ways of thinking about politics and democracy" that can be integrated into different parts of a decision-making institution. However, Saward explicitly invokes normative values to define the concept as "a critical commitment to democratic values of popular participation and political equality" aimed at "articulating and analyzing new solutions to the problems of democracy" (Saward, 2003, p. 168).

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[13] As famously stated by James Bohman, deliberative democracy can be defined as "a family of views according to which the public deliberation of free and equal citizens is the core of legitimate political decision-making and self-government" (Bohman 1998: 401). In other words, they understand the democratic legitimacy of propositions and decisions made by formal institutions of democracies or even citizen participatory is not guaranteed a priori.

Within the framework of deliberative democratic theories, democratic innovations are expected to fulfill critical, epistemic, and ethical functions. These functions include generating well-reasoned and creative propositions to address collective problems, thereby mitigating the vulnerabilities of representative democracy (Geissel, 2023, p. 109). Additionally, democratic innovations are expected to provide opportunities for citizens to develop their democratic and communicative capacities, enabling them "to see things from each other's point of view, understanding others' interests and arguments as well as one's own" (Goodin, 2008, p. 2). These insights align with one of the earliest definitions of democratic innovation in academic literature. John Stewart (1996, p. 32) describes innovations as "democratic practices" designed "to bring informed views of ordinary citizens into the processes of local government."

On the other hand, the high normative and epistemic expectations of deliberative democracy have justified numerous studies assessing whether democratic innovations may be vulnerable to or unintentionally reinforce existing political disadvantages and asymmetries. For instance, several studies have examined: The inclusion of disadvantaged citizens (Field, 2022),

The promotion of epistemic functions (Krick, 2021), For example, we can refer to a series of studies focused on measuring the inclusion of disadvantaged citizens (Field, 2022), promoting epistemic functions (Krick, 2021), assessing changes in citizens' preferences and levels of trust (Astron et al., 2017), addressing challenges in new digital participatory events (Grönlund et al., 2020), evaluating direct participatory events like plebiscites (Hendriks, 2019), and examining conditions of connection with other institutions as a means to form a deliberative system (Curato and Böker, 2016; Dean et al., 2020), among other related themes.

In summary, according to the jargon of deliberative democratic theories, democratic innovations are expected to produce epistemic and ethical functions. These functions include providing unbiased, qualified, and creative propositions to address collective problems, thus enriching representative democracy vulnerabilities (Geissel, 2023, p. 109). Additionally, democratic innovations are expected to offer an opportunity for citizens to develop their capacities and enable them "to see things from each other's point of view, understanding others' interests and arguments as well as one's own" (Goodin, 2008, p.2). These insights are echoed in one of the earliest definitions of democratic innovation used in academic papers. John Stewart (1996, p. 32) defines innovations as "democratic practices" that are "designed" to "bring informed views of ordinary citizens into the processes of local government."

On the other hand, the high normative and epistemic expectations of deliberative democracy justify numerous studies that assess the extent to which democratic innovations may be *vulnerable* to or unintentionally reproduce existing political disadvantages or asymmetries.

For example, we can refer to a series of studies focused on measuring the inclusion of disadvantaged citizens (Field, 2022), promoting epistemic functions (Krick, 2021), assessing changes in citizens' preferences and levels of trust (Astron et al., 2017), addressing challenges in new digital participatory events (Grönlund et al., 2020), evaluating direct participatory events like plebiscites (Hendriks, 2019), and examining conditions of connection with other institutions as a means to form a deliberative system (Curato and Böker, 2016; Dean et al., 2020), among other related themes.

A second family of bottom-up and more restrictive definitions of democratic innovations, beyond emphasizing the qualities of ideal citizen participation experiences, focuses particularly on the concrete outcomes they should generate in society. The most widely referenced definition within this approach—formulated by Graham Smith (2009)—serves as its ideal type.

Smith's definition underscores that the effectiveness of democratic innovations, both in process and outcome, is not guaranteed beforehand; rather, it requires intentional design and subsequent evaluation. As he puts it, democratic innovations are "institutions that have been intentionally designed to increase and enhance citizen participation in the political decision-making process" (Smith, 2009, p. 1). Within this framework, the effectiveness of participatory processes becomes a fundamental value.

Smith's concept responds to a specific concern—the critiques and empirical evidence highlighting the ineffectiveness of participatory processes (e.g., as noted by Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2018). Another defining feature of his approach is its emphasis on which citizens should be prioritized in democratic innovations—particularly those "who are systematically disengaged from the political process" (Smith, 2009, p. 3). This criterion underscores the importance of expanding political engagement beyond voting, especially for those who typically do not participate actively in democracy. However, it is important to note that Smith's perspective does not dismiss the significance of other forms of political activity, whether informal or agonistic, even when they do not involve systematically disengaged citizens.

Additionally, Smith's concept includes a distinctive element that has contributed to its widespread influence: a structured list of four "democratic goods" and two "institutional goods" that democratic innovations can aim to achieve[14] (Smith, 2009, p. 7). While these goods are

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[14] Smith's (2009, p.12-13) four key democratic goods are inclusiveness, which ensures political equality in participation; popular control, assessing the influence of participants in decision-making; considered judgement, evaluating citizens" understanding of issues and diverse perspectives; and transparency, focusing on the openness of proceedings. Alongside these, two institutional goods are considered: efficiency, which looks at the participation

neither definitive nor always simultaneously attainable, Smith argues they are invaluable for analyzing both the democratic legitimacy and practical feasibility of innovative democratic processes, as they are "arguably fundamental to any theoretical account of the democratic legitimacy of institutions" (ibid., pp. 12-13). Due to this empirical focus, many studies explicitly use Smith's concept and his list of democratic goods to conduct case studies (e.g., Wright, 2012; Mattijssen et al., 2020; Camdell, 2022; Hendriks, 2022), including studies diagnosing failures in democratic innovations (e.g., Spada & Ryan, 2017).

Whether or not the concept of "democratic goods" is applied, the idea that democratic innovations should enable ordinary citizens to have a significant impact on state decision-making aligns with numerous other conceptualizations and democratic ambitions worldwide. A relevant definition of democratic innovation in this regard is proposed by Gohn (2019, p. 105), who understands it as the "participation of representatives of organized civil society in state participatory institutions" in the "development and implementation of specific policies and the inclusion of new topics in the government planning agenda."

My research on the empirical operationalization of this concept in Brazil revealed a series of case studies examining the conditions and factors that enable public policy citizen forums and councils to influence policymaking. These studies have yielded several important findings, expanding the list of political vulnerabilities that democratic innovations can expose citizens to. For instance, they have highlighted the dependence of democratic innovations on the political will of representatives (Almeida & Tatagiba, 2012; Lückman, 2007), the impact of left-wing governments in recognizing participatory initiatives (Avritzer, 2003; Nobre & Coelho, 2004), and the problems arising from the state's monopoly over agenda-setting and the implementation of decisions made in participatory institutions (Tatagiba, 2005).

Although definitions of democratic innovations like Smith's (2009) are widespread and well-recognized, it is important to consider alternative conceptualizations that focus on more complex political dimensions overlooked by his approach. I refer to these conceptualizations as complex because they aim to understand how the transformations and political vulnerabilities that democratic innovations generate are ambiguous, multi-faceted, and context-dependent.

An approach that offers deeper insights into democratic innovations—particularly their influence on state decision-making—frames them as ongoing processes rather than isolated occurrences or fixed institutions. This perspective is reflected in a widely recognized definition proposed by Newton (2012). Like Smith, Newton characterizes democratic innovations as ideas

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costs for citizens and authorities, and transferability, assessing the adaptability of innovations across various political contexts.

in action, designed to “change the structures or processes of democratic government and politics to improve them.” However, unlike Smith, Newton emphasizes the importance of local participatory experiments, which, despite their initially limited impact, may gradually spread across political systems and ascend to higher levels of regional and national government. Examples that illustrate Newton’s interpretation of democratic innovations include early town meetings in the USA (Zimmerman, 1999) and Participatory Budgeting in Brazil (Dagnino, 2002; Avritzer, 2003; Wrampler, 2008). Both began as small-scale experiments but eventually gained global recognition and adoption.

Elstub and Escobar (2019, pp. 14-18) introduce additional dimensions that are crucial for a comprehensive empirical operationalization of democratic innovations.

To address the temporal dimension of democratic innovations, Elstub and Escobar (2019) observe that Smith’s institutional focus implies a certain “stability and continuity over time.” This perspective may lead us to overlook the fact that social constructs evolve, and can be constantly innovated—whether through reconfiguration, reform, or even collapse. Therefore, they argue that democratic innovations should be understood as “processes” rather than static entities (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, p. 14).

Regarding the contextual aspect of democratic innovations, Elstub and Escobar (2019, p. 15) acknowledge that what is considered "innovative" is inherently context-dependent. This means that a political practice or institution long established in one setting may still be considered novel when introduced in a different country or location. The same principle applies when mechanisms or practices traditionally used at one level of governance are transferred to another level, adapted for a different area, or repurposed within the same sphere.

Finally, when Elstub and Escobar (2019, p. 15) define democratic innovations as fostering “reimagination” and creating “opportunities for participation, deliberation, and influence” in governance processes, they offer multiple advantages for operationalizing the concept. The notion of “reimagination” is particularly significant, emphasizing that the “new” can emerge from the reconfiguration of the “old,” thereby encouraging a more inventive and provocative approach to “enhancing democracy primarily through reimagining the role that citizens can play in governance processes.” By emphasizing “opportunities” for diverse forms of participation, they incorporate both direct and deliberative modes of engagement, regardless of their measurable impact. This approach underscores the importance of varied and hybrid forms of citizen participation (Elstub & Escobar, 2019, pp. 15-18).

From my perspective, this understanding expands the possibilities for citizens to exert political influence in governance while fostering a culture of continuous experimentation.

Numerous Brazilian studies have long argued for the importance of considering how process, context, and contingencies shape not only democratic innovations but also the citizen experiences they promote and the political vulnerabilities they seek to address. These studies provide key references for operationalizing these dimensions in empirical research, demonstrating implications that extend beyond those considered by Elstub and Escobar's (2019) framework.

For example, Mendonça and Cunha (2012), in proposing citizen participation projects for the Legislative Assembly of Minas Gerais, not only highlight the temporal dimension of democratic innovations but also emphasize the need for their continuous adaptation based on the changing dynamics of participants and contexts. Regarding the contextual dimension of democratic innovations, Almeida and colleagues (2021), in their analysis of various Brazilian Participatory Institutions (PIs)—such as Public Policy Councils focused on health, women, and food security—found that their performance and effectiveness tend to vary based on three interrelated factors: (i) Situational political opportunities, (ii) The dynamism and configuration of policy communities, and (iii) Pre-existing state capacities within specific policy areas (Almeida et al., 2021, p. 29).

Evelina Dagnino's concept of "perverse confluence" underscores how, depending on the socio-historical context, certain political innovations may inadvertently undermine the practical realization of citizenship and democracy, potentially leading to the erosion of the rule of law. This occurs when neoliberal and participatory democratic projects converge, both drawing on a shared discourse of citizenship, in ways that obscure their differences and dilute political conflicts, ultimately weakening democratic values.

In summa -=ry, Dagnino argues that after Brazil's participatory renewal in 1988, the election of the Collor government in 1989 marked the onset of neoliberalism in the country, which clashed with the collectivist values and rights-based advocacy at the core of Brazilian citizenship ideals. These ideals were increasingly overshadowed by neoliberal principles of individualism, corporate management, and voluntarism, particularly through an emphasis on "charity towards the poor."

Dagnino observes that a "perverse confluence" emerged from the intersection of the growing demand for decentralized state decision-making and the neoliberal conception of citizenship, which led to the problematic empowerment of third-sector institutions, such as NGOs and philanthropic organizations. While these institutions are not inherently "enemies" of democracy, they present certain challenges, including: a) Encouraging citizens to outsource their political activity to these organizations, which claim to be legitimate representatives of the

people but often lack transparency and accountability; b) Contributing to the erosion of the rule of law, as the State, instead of acting as a guarantor and provider of citizen rights, increasingly outsources its social functions to these organizations (Dagnino, 2004, pp. 157-158).

Concept/Approach	**Citizen Vulnerabilities Addressed**	**Political Vulnerabilities Potentially Reproduced or Intensified**	**Idealized Transformative Political Experiences**
Flexible Concepts	Lack of opportunities for political participation beyond elections (Lavalle et al., 2006)	Risk of superficial or ineffective engagement	Any experience where citizens experiment with new political roles in democracy and shed light on democratic reform can expand the political grammar of different societies and develop their capacities (Avritzer, 2002)
Deliberative Concepts	Lack of informed and reflective participation; low-quality discourse (Goodin, 2008)	Potential for exclusion of disadvantaged citizens; epistemic inequality (Field, 2022)	Enhancing citizens' capacity to produce informed, qualified, and creative solutions to collective problems (Saward, 2003)
Policy-Making Oriented (Smith's Concept)	Systematic disengagement from the political process (Smith, 2009)	Dependence on political will; variable effectiveness across contexts (Avritzer, 2003)	Institutions specifically designed to allow citizens to influence policy-making processes and ensure citizens, especially disengaged ones, can impact political decision-making (Smith, 2009)
Complex Concepts	Contextual and temporal constraints for political participation (Elstub and Escobar, 2019)	Ambiguous outcomes; potential for negative consequences (Dagnino, 2004)	Fostering continuous experimentation, reimagination, and hybrid forms of citizen engagement, accounting for local and temporal factors. (Elstub and Escobar, 2019)

Table 3: Vulnerability and Experience in Bottom-Up Concepts of Democratic Innovation. Source: Author.

2.1.1 Innovation as a profound societal transformation or beyond representative democracies

Before concluding my review, it is essential to consider more radical definitions of democratic innovations—those that go beyond merely reforming or strengthening representative democracies and instead seek to fundamentally reshape participatory processes and institutions. This examination is important because many scholars who have coined some of the most widely referenced concepts seem to struggle with incorporating these more transformative possibilities..

For instance, Newton (2012, p. 4) argues that, given the complexity of reaching a consensus on what democratic innovations can achieve, defining them remains a "matter of opinion." Therefore, he suggests that the concept should primarily focus on "assessing whether a given innovation has succeeded in achieving at least some of its goals." In contrast, Smith (2009) offers a more precise definition, stating that democratic innovations should be "specifically designed to increase and deepen citizen participation in the political decision-making process" (Smith, 2009, pp. 14-15). Additionally, Smith outlines a broad and inclusive list of democratic and institutional goods that innovations should contribute to democracies. However, when it comes to the potential of democratic innovations to fundamentally challenge

and transform democracy and society, his position is less explicit. He only suggests that they might contribute to "weakening more established institutions of advanced industrial democracies" (Smith, 2009, p. 3), without further elaboration.

A notable contrast is found in Fung and Wright (2003), who conceptualize democratic innovations not as "minor reforms of existing practices" but as "fundamental redesigns of basic social institutions." Their perspective emerges in response to The Real Utopias Project conferences, where they caution against vague or unrealistic utopian fantasies that risk leading to ineffective or even harmful endeavors. Instead, they advocate for "real utopias"—pragmatic yet visionary institutional designs rooted in the belief that practical possibilities are not fixed independently of human imagination. This perspective is shaped by their observation that "affirmative" institutional models, which historically sought to counteract the negative effects of capitalist dynamics—such as poverty, unemployment, and rising inequality—are becoming increasingly scarce (Fung & Wright, 2003, p. 4).

Guided by these ideals and drawing on three concrete case studies, including the Participatory Budgeting of Porto Alegre, Fung and Wright introduce the concept of "empowered participatory governance." However, in the end, this concept does not fully embrace the radical transformative ideals they initially advocate. Instead, it focuses more on expanding local citizen participation, emphasizing problem-solving, deliberation, and establishing formal connections between local units and centralized authorities (Fung & Wright, 2003, p. 16).

The concept of democratic innovation that made me more aware of the distinction between concepts that explicitly or implicitly relate to broad structural changes in democracy was the one introduced by Bua and Bussu (2021) in contrast to Warren’s (2014) top-down "governance-driven democratization" (GDD). Bua and Bussu propose the idea of "democracy-driven governance" (DDG), which diverges from Warren's GDD by emphasizing bottom-up, transformative approaches that aim to redistribute power and resources while addressing social justice concerns. While GDD focuses on enhancing the functionality and legitimacy of existing governance structures, often with a functionalist goal of improving policy outcomes, DDG is driven by social movements and popular mobilization. It seeks to transform governance structures, making them more inclusive and equitable. DDG is primarily concerned with rectifying structural inequalities and advancing social justice, aiming to "reclaim and reinvent participatory structures" in ways that challenge and change institutions from within (Bua & Bussu, 2021, p. 717). This conceptual contrast deepened my understanding of how democratic

innovations can either reinforce the status quo or drive substantial structural changes in democracies.

Other conceptualizations of democratic innovations, particularly those influenced by agonistic democratic theories[15], offer definitions that explicitly challenge existing institutions and question the social order. These perspectives address citizen vulnerabilities by focusing on the marginalization and oppression of systematically excluded groups, exposing silences, closures, and exclusions that contemporary institutional democracies perpetuate (Hillgreen et al., 2016). However, they also risk reproducing political vulnerabilities by reinforcing adversarial positions and deepening socio-political conflicts (Tambakaki, 2017). The idealized transformative experiences promoted by agonistic concepts include facilitating continuous inquiry, exposing power dynamics, and fostering respectful debates among citizens to encourage understanding and transformation (Westphal, 2018).

For Tambakaki (2017, p. 2), an agonistic perspective on democratic innovation does not seek to reactivate or transform the institutional, representative, or liberal aspects of contemporary democracies. Instead, its objective is to renew democracy by creating conditions for ongoing inquiry, exposing and challenging the silences, closures, normalizations, and exclusions embedded in contemporary institutional democracies (ibid., p. 3). In this sense, rather than striving for comprehensive agreements or consensus-driven decisions, democratic innovations guided by agonistic perspectives emphasize the irreducibility of differences among citizens and the valorization of popular conflicts and struggles as fundamental drivers of socio-political change.

Despite Tambakaki's (2017) propositions aligning closely with widely accepted agonistic perspectives on democratic innovation, it is important to highlight significant differences and areas of contention within these concepts that warrant closer examination.

First, several definitions, unlike Tambakaki's (2017), do not perceive institutional democracy as inherently problematic for the agonistic project. On the contrary, some scholars argue for the deliberate design of agonistic spaces and mini-publics within institutional settings. According to Westphal (2018), agonistic mini-publics are considered "worthwhile democratic

[15] Paxton (2020, p.75-76) observes that while agonistic theories of democracy are not uniform, it's possible to find a certain degree of convergence of theorists like Mouffe, Owen, Connolly, and Tully in three core principles. First, there's a recognition of the value of conflict for its productive potential and the framing of democracy not merely as a process of rational and reasonable deliberation but rather as a realm of "passionate political contestation". Second, there is an emphasis on the importance of fostering a multitude of spaces that facilitate ongoing challenges and critiques against the existing hegemonic order. Third, the recognition that citizens are necessary interdependence, urging a greater acknowledgment of such interconnectedness in democratic discourse.

innovations" because they transform citizens into "adversaries[16]" who engage in passionate yet respectful debates, bringing overlooked forms of oppression into public discourse. Additionally, these spaces create opportunities to "pluralize the established institutional setting" by exploring alternative frameworks and actions to address societal challenges.

Second, some scholars argue that agonistic participatory spaces should prioritize systematically marginalized and oppressed groups, differing from conceptions of democratic innovation that do not make this distinction, as previously discussed. However, Hillgreen et al. (2016, p. 92) emphasize that the primary goal should be to create spaces where marginalized groups can engage with their counterparts or adversaries in respectful representation of opposing viewpoints, fostering controversy and debate. Others, such as Lowndes (2018) and Paxton (2018, p. 25), argue that agonistic spaces should focus on bridging social divides by creating productive tensions that encourage interdependent relationships across different social positions.

Third, I identified certain concepts of democratic innovation that explicitly aim to create agonistic spaces for debating the redistribution of economic and natural resources. These perspectives address citizen vulnerabilities by promoting the equitable management of common-pool resources—such as water, land, and knowledge—while critically examining asymmetries and conflicts of interest in their ownership and use. This approach fosters inclusive participation and collaborative governance, empowering communities to manage shared resources sustainably and equitably. Asenbaum (2023) emphasizes the importance of inclusive participation in resource governance as a means of mitigating vulnerabilities, while Björgvinsson et al. (2012) highlight the role of collaborative design in acknowledging and addressing power imbalances in resource management.

Björgvinsson et al. (2012) introduce the concept of "thinging"—the idea that agonistic spaces should be understood as socio-material collectives comprising both humans and non-humans, through which matters of concern and controversies are handled (Björgvinsson et al., 2012, p. 130). Within this framework, political participation and agonistic controversies that emerge in these collectives should be guided by "infrastructuring"—a process that requires participants to move beyond viewing social objects and entities as discrete and instead to contextualize the dynamic, asymmetric networks of resources, labor, and conflicts of interest that shape their practices and social struggles (Björgvinsson, 2012, pp. 130, 143).

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[16] It's important to consider the distinction made by Mouffe between "antagonism," which is the struggle between enemies, and "agonism," which is a productive struggle between adversaries. (Mouffe, 2009, p. 551)

The idealized transformative experiences advanced by socio-technical perspectives involve contextualizing dynamic networks of socio-political interactions and re-articulating essential resources through democratic management. This approach seeks to address citizen vulnerabilities and empower transformative actions (Björgvinsson et al., 2012; Asenbaum, 2023). Concerning this dimension of socio-technical materiality, Asenbaum (2023) builds on Kioupkiolis (2019), who argues that democratic innovations, beyond their potential to challenge political hierarchies, should also be defined by how they thematize and re-articulate common-pool resources, such as water, land, and knowledge (Asenbaum, 2023, p. 7).

An early example of a democratic innovation within this category is Pereira's (2003) study, which examines how the Brazilian state implemented land distribution and agrarian reform in the early 1990s.

Concept/Approach	Citizen Vulnerabilities Addressed	Political Vulnerabilities Potentially Reproduced or Intensified	Idealized Transformative Political Experiences Advanced
Agonistic Concepts	Addressing marginalization and oppression (Hillgreen et al., 2016)- Challenging silences, closures, and exclusions in institutional democracies (Tambakaki, 2017)	Reinforcing adversarial positions (Tambakaki, 2017). Deepening socio-political conflicts (Westphal, 2018)	Continuous inquiry and exposure to power dynamics (Tambakaki, 2017)- Respectful debates to foster understanding and transformation (Westphal, 2018)
Socio-Technical Concepts	Equitable management of common-pool resources (Asenbaum, 2023) Addressing asymmetric networks of resources and conflicts of interest (Björgvinsson et al., 2012)	Bureaucratization and technocratic control (Björgvinsson et al., 2012) Overlooking individual needs for collective concerns (Kioupkiolis, 2019)	Contextualizing dynamic socio-political interactions (Björgvinsson et al., 2012) Democratic management of essential resources (Asenbaum, 2023)

Table 4: Vulnerability and Experience in Bottom-Up Agonistic and Socio-technical Concepts of Democratic Innovation. Source: Author.

2.2 Citizens' assemblies as a specific type of democratic innovation

As noted earlier, whether the goal is to improve how states respond to citizens' needs and ensure accountability for the services they provide, or to expand citizens' political roles and decision-making power, discussions on democratic innovations almost always involve altering an existing relationship between citizens and democracy. However, it is crucial to recognize the significant variations in how democratic innovations are defined, including differences in values, methods, and expected outcomes. Additionally, when analyzing a specific democratic innovation, it is important to consider its conceptual nuances within this broader debate.

This thesis focuses on a particular form of democratic innovation: the world's first transnational citizens' assembly. Drawing from the broader definitions outlined earlier, I position the Global Assembly within the category of democratic innovations that seek to expand citizens' political roles beyond voting and consuming public policies. However, within this broad classification, there is significant debate regarding the values, design, and anticipated outcomes that should define citizen-centered democratic innovations. Therefore, before determining which concept of democratic innovation will be used to assess the Global Assembly, it is necessary to address two key questions: a) How have citizens' assemblies been conceptualized and distinguished from other forms of participatory mechanisms by theorists and researchers? b) What challenges have been identified in existing literature for these assemblies to meet their intended goals?

2.2.1 Citizen assemblies

Researchers such as Smith (2009) and Elstub & Escobar (2019) trace the first conceptualization of citizens' assemblies to Robert Dahl's (1989) influential work and his concept of minipopulus. Dahl (1989, p. 340) introduces the idea of a *minipopulus*[17] as a means to form an attentive public capable of generating legitimate decisions on collective issues. However, this legitimacy would derive from the minipopulus ability to represent a given demos and to produce *highly informed judgments on complex policy matters*. In this sense, the fundamental political vulnerabilities that citizens' assemblies seek to address closely align with those identified in deliberative democracy's conceptualizations of democratic innovation—namely, the lack of opportunities for citizens to engage in decision-making and the deficiencies in the epistemic and ethical quality of societal discourse, preferences, and decisions.

Regarding the transformative political experiences that citizens' assemblies should foster to address these vulnerabilities, Dahl (1989) proposes several institutional mechanisms to achieve these objectives: a) Inclusivity – Ensuring broad representation through the random selection of at least 100 citizens from the target population; b) Informed Judgment – Promoting sustained and well-supported deliberation, facilitated by a committee of scholars and experts; c) Effectiveness – Establishing specialized minipopuli to deliberate on distinct policy issues,

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[17] "Suppose an advanced democratic country were to create a "minipopulus" consisting of perhaps a thousand citizens randomly selected out of the entire demos. Its task would be to deliberate, for a year perhaps, on an issue and then to announce its choices. The members of a minipopulus could "meet" by telecommunications. One minipopulus could decide on the agenda of issues, while another might concern itself with a major issue. Thus one minipopulus could exist for each major issue on the agenda. A minipopulus could exist at any level of government—national, state, or local. It could be attended—again by telecommunications—by an advisory committee of scholars and specialists and by an administrative staff. It could hold hearings, commission research, and engage in debate and discussion." (Dahl, 1989, p.340).

integrating their recommendations across various levels of government; d) Public Engagement – Encouraging public hearings, debates, and discussions to foster broader societal participation.

A real-world example that closely mirrors Dahl's (1989) concept is the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (BCCA), held in 2004 in Canada. This assembly brought together 160 citizens who deliberated over 11 weeks and ultimately produced recommendations for a new electoral system for the province of British Columbia. Among other motivations, Warren and Pearse (2008, pp. 1-5) argue that this initiative emerged as a response to growing public discontent with representative political institutions, particularly political parties. Although the proposed electoral reforms were ultimately not implemented, as they were subject to a referendum requiring broader public approval, researchers and analysts involved in the process view the British Columbia experience as a benchmark for future citizens' assemblies (Warren & Pearse, 2008, p. 18; Ferejohn, 2008, p. 192).

If we consider Ferejohn's (2008) description, it becomes evident that the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (BCCA) shares several defining features with Dahl's concept of democratic innovation.

Firstly, Ferejohn highlights the stratified random selection of BCCA members as a key element. This method not only ensured fair demographic representation but also, in Ferejohn's view, helped align the assembly's deliberations and proposals with the broader population's perspectives. Furthermore, Ferejohn (2008, p. 210) argues that, statistically, similar outcomes might be expected if random samples from the general population underwent comparable deliberative processes, suggesting that participants would likely converge toward similar proposals.

Secondly, Ferejohn (2008, p. 196) identifies the BCCA as fulfilling "two central requirements for direct democracy": (i) thorough, informed, and public deliberation, and (ii) an opportunity for the electorate to ratify or endorse the assembly's legislative proposals. These goals were achieved through an extensive learning process, incorporating information sessions, guest speakers, and expert consultations, which enabled citizens to form well-rounded viewpoints. Additionally, the assembly produced a balanced proposal that integrated expert knowledge with the lived experiences and interests of a demographically representative group of citizens.

The ambition to replicate "a city or country in miniature" (Gerwin, 2018, p. 17), as advocated by Robert Dahl, and exemplified in the British Columbia model, has influenced many participatory institutions and citizen assembly models worldwide. For instance, an OECD (2020) analysis of 289 citizen participation events across multiple countries found that citizens'

assemblies differ significantly in composition and duration from other forms of public engagement. Specifically, assemblies classified as citizens' assemblies averaged 90 participants per process, whereas other formats, such as citizens' juries, councils, and conferences, ranged between 15 and 30 participants. Regarding duration, citizens' assemblies typically spanned 47 weeks, with participants engaging in approximately 19 cumulative days of learning and deliberation sessions. In contrast, other citizen engagement formats lasted between 2 and 5 weeks, with only 2 to 5 days dedicated to deliberation (OECD, 2020, p. 14).

Beyond the goal of creating a representative microcosm of citizens, engaged in lengthy deliberative processes to form well-informed judgments, citizens' assemblies have also been widely used to address complex and sensitive issues (OECD, 2020). As noted earlier, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly (BCCA) focused on electoral system reform, with citizens ultimately deciding via referendum. Following this precedent, the Dutch government convened a citizens' assembly on electoral reform, taking a pioneering step toward national-level implementation. Since then, several high-profile citizen assemblies in Europe have addressed controversial and widely debated issues, including: abortion (Ireland, 2016), Brexit (England, 2017), national values and projects (Scotland, 2019), and genetic editing (Australia, 2021) have also been addressed through citizens's assemblies.

Many civil society organizations, social movements, and governments across Europe are now turning to citizens' assemblies to tackle the climate and ecological crises. According to KNOCA (2022), more than 80 citizen participation events have been conducted at the local level—including city and district assemblies—across Europe, with over 30 held in the United Kingdom alone. At the national level, at least ten citizens' assemblies have taken place in ten countries, including Spain, Austria, Luxembourg, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Scotland, the United Kingdom, France, and Ireland. Additionally, in 2023, Belgium announced the establishment of a permanent citizens' assembly dedicated to climate policy. In contrast, outside Europe, KNOCA (2022) records only two local-level events in the United States and Canada. The Global Assembly, which is the focus of this thesis, justifies its design and transnational scope by pointing to the complexity of the climate emergency. This trend reflects a growing recognition of the importance of engaging citizens directly in addressing one of the most pressing global challenges of our time.

Finally, beyond employing institutional mechanisms to enable a representative sample of the population to address decision-making and epistemic vulnerabilities related to complex issues, the BCCA model also sought to promote a broader participatory experience for the general public, extending its impact beyond the selected participants. To achieve this, the

assembly employed media campaigns, open plenary sessions, public hearings, digital forums, and a referendum. This comprehensive approach allowed the wider population of British Columbia to engage with, contribute to, and ultimately approve or reject the assembly's proposals (Warren & Pearse, 2008, p. 11).

As seen throughout this discussion, the citizens' assembly model in democratic innovations is structured around specific design mechanisms and normative requirements intended to foster transformative democratic experiences and strengthen decision-making processes to address citizens' political vulnerabilities in contemporary representative democracies. These mechanisms have been particularly relevant in tackling complex issues, such as the climate crisis. However, in recent years, some scholars have proposed more flexible definitions of citizens' assemblies, aiming to ensure comparability across diverse citizen participation events and reduce the constraints imposed by overly rigid classifications.

Given the proliferation of participatory institutions and events labeled as citizens' assemblies, the De Gruyter Citizen Assembly Handbook (2023), which brings together expert analyses on the subject, endorses a broader and more simplified definition of the concept. According to this perspective, citizens' assemblies are participatory institutions that "bring together an inclusive group of lay citizens to engage in deliberation on a public issue to exert a public influence" (Vrydagh, 2023, p. 4). This definition highlights three core principles that distinguish citizens' assemblies from other democratic innovations: a) Inclusion of lay citizens; b) Deliberation; c) Public influence. A closer examination of each principle helps clarify their implications.

Firstly, The authors argue that citizens' assemblies should ideally include all individuals impacted by their decisions, ensuring that everyone has an equal opportunity to participate (Vrydagh, 2023, p. 6). Still, they acknowledge the challenges of balancing inclusivity, equal participation, and deliberative ideals, as Fishkin (2008) has noted. There are inherent trade-offs even when citizens' assemblies employ random selection methods to create demographically representative microcosms, as the goal is to assemble "groups small enough to be genuinely deliberative, and representative enough to be genuinely democratic" (Goodin & Dryzek, 2006, p. 220). Recognizing that no single approach guarantees full inclusivity, the authors argue that even open self-selection of participants can be valid, provided that efforts are made to correct biases and distortions. Ultimately, they endorse Curato et al.'s (2022) recommendation, suggesting that inclusivity strategies should be adapted to the specific context of each citizens' assembly, leaving the choice of selection methods to the discretion of implementers (Vrydagh, 2023, p. 8).

While the authors advocate flexibility regarding inclusivity, they adopt a more prescriptive stance on deliberation. Drawing from widely accepted definitions, such as Bächtiger et al. (2018), they define deliberation as a process of mutual reason-giving "regarding matters of common concern," guided by inclusivity, reciprocity, and parity of participation (Vrydagh, 2023, pp. 5-6). They argue that for deliberation to be meaningful, it is essential to address pre-existing asymmetries among citizens, particularly by ensuring well-facilitated debates that allow all voices to be heard.

The authors take a more ambiguous stance on the principle of public influence. On the one hand, they acknowledge that citizens' assemblies still face challenges in exerting "any effect" on public decision-making (Vrydagh, 2023, p. 8). This perspective appears to diverge from Smith's (2009) conception of democratic innovations, which emphasizes formal political decision-making processes. On the other hand, they warn that when citizens' assemblies fail to produce meaningful decision-making outcomes, they risk "dissolving into tokenism" and frustrating participants (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020). To counter this, they explore alternative ways in which citizens' assemblies can exert influence, beyond direct policy impact, such as improving "public deliberation, distilling reasoned and informed arguments among the citizenry, building the deliberative capacity of the system, and fostering a macro-deliberative culture" (Vrydagh, 2023, p.9). Despite this broader perspective, the authors ultimately reaffirm their hope that citizens' assemblies can still "influence public decisions, given that a deliberative system ought to be consequential" (Vrydagh, 2023, p. 9). They conclude by evaluating decision-making methods used within citizens' assemblies, such as voting, and the presentation of outcomes through public reports. They acknowledge that public reports serve as the primary mechanism for citizens' assemblies to exert public influence, while also recognizing the importance of media coverage and engagement with elected representatives. Notwithstanding, there remains some ambiguity in their position. It is unclear whether they define public influence as any effect on the public, including potentially negative ones, or if they distinguish between different types and degrees of influence, depending on the mechanisms through which assembly decisions are formulated and disseminated.

2.2.2 Citizens' assemblies and their challenges

As previously discussed, the conceptualization of Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) is less flexible and expansive than many other democratic innovations. Even in the De Gruyter Handbook of Citizens' Assemblies (2023), where the editors resisted offering highly prescriptive definitions, three core principles were still established. However, effectively

implementing these principles presents significant challenges. Below, I outline some of the most critical issues.

One of the most notable criticisms of Citizens' Assemblies comes from Lafont (2023), who directly challenges what she considers the dominant perspective on these assemblies today—one exemplified by Smith's (2009) model and the British Columbia experience. According to Lafont, this model operates under the assumption that "empowering the (relatively few) participants in citizens' assemblies to do the thinking, deliberating, and deciding on political issues for the rest of the citizenry" is a sufficient form of democratic legitimacy (Lafont, 2023, p. 52). She warns that this shortcut approach risks allowing citizens' assemblies to act as proxies for important decisions, giving them an undue aura of democratic legitimacy without genuine broad-based participation.

Lafont's central concern is the legitimacy and representativeness of Citizens' Assemblies, which she critiques by questioning their: a) procedures for selecting assembly members; b) transparency of the process; c) their general mechanisms of accountability production. Still, her primary objection revolves around the claim that random selection creates a microcosm of the population, thereby legitimizing the assembly's recommendations. In pluralistic societies, she argues, "there is so much ethical and political disagreement among citizens" (Lafont, 2023, p. 49) that it is unlikely for a randomly selected group to consistently reflect the broader population's diverse views. This discrepancy raises concerns about whether CA recommendations are truly trustworthy and fair—as non-participants may feel unrepresented in the final decisions. Additionally, Lafont warns that if CA deliberations were made more transparent, many citizens would realize that the majority of the sample does not resemble them (Lafont, 2023, p. 50). This, she argues, could undermine public confidence in the assembly's recommendations, weakening its legitimacy rather than strengthening it.

Beyond representation issues, Lafont also critiques Citizens' Assemblies for lacking direct accountability mechanisms. She argues that the absence of a direct mechanism of accountability in CAs, as participants are "in no way accountable to citizens outside of the assembly" (Lafont, 2023, p. 50). This situation leads to issues when CA decisions conflict with broader public opinion, making it unclear "whether and why officials should just follow the judgement of a CA over the judgement of the citizenry at large" (Lafont, 2023, p. 51).

Recent empirical studies further validate Lafont's theoretical concerns. In their qualitative interviews with politicians and citizens in Ireland, where Citizens' Assemblies are increasingly common, Garry et al. (2020, pp. 547-548) identify two key findings: a) Citizens with stronger ideological views are less favorable toward Citizens' Assemblies compared to

moderates. This suggests that the public does not automatically view CA decisions as legitimate, even when they are made by a demographically representative microcosm; b) Politicians are reluctant to grant significant decision-making powers to Citizens' Assemblies. Many question whether random selection alone provides sufficient democratic legitimacy for assemblies to make binding decisions on behalf of society.

An alternative way to conceptualize Citizens' Assemblies is through a systemic (Vrydagh, 2023) or bottom-up (Lafont, 2023) approach. In this view, Citizens' Assemblies should be seen less as decision-making bodies and more as tools for fostering public debate and citizen activation. However, ensuring public awareness and engagement in these participatory events remains a major challenge. Empirical studies suggest that Citizens' Assemblies often fail to capture public attention. As Rountree & Curato (2021, p. 7) note, their dissemination on social media generates low engagement, and traditional media outlets are not particularly interested in covering them. The lack of polarization, conflict, and prominent spokespersons—which typically drive media attention—contributes to this visibility problem.

Despite advancements in deliberative democracy, effectively integrating democratic principles into Citizens' Assemblies remains an ongoing challenge. Even in exemplary cases, such as the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, several problems can be observed: a) Restrictions on agenda-setting – Participants often have limited ability to shape the scope of the assembly's discussions; b) Dominance of certain perspectives – As observed by Ferejohn (2008, p. 199), asymmetries in resources and time commitment can result in some participants having more influence over deliberations than others; c) Barriers to inclusivity and parity – As Young (2021) highlights, deliberative events frequently fail to account for pre-existing power relations within society, leading to unequal participation dynamics.

A striking example of persistent inequalities in Citizens' Assemblies comes from Switzerland. Gerber et al. (2019, p. 18) observe that women not only participate less frequently than men but also express fewer viewpoints and propose fewer initiatives due to greater constraints in speaking publicly before an audience. This finding underscores the ongoing challenges in achieving genuine inclusivity in deliberative settings.

Finally, another set of political vulnerabilities associated with citizens' assemblies becomes evident when analyzed through the systemic paradigm. As Faria (2017) argues, if deliberative arenas such as citizens' assemblies are not adequately interconnected, there is a risk of representative disconnection between different parts of the deliberative system. This disconnection can undermine inclusivity and weaken representation, preventing various actors and issues from being meaningfully incorporated into deliberative processes. To address this,

it is crucial to ensure that the linkages between different deliberative arenas function effectively, maintaining cohesion within the system. Additionally, these arenas must be continuously monitored and adjusted to prevent the domination of certain actors or issues, thus safeguarding inclusivity and fairness in the deliberative process. Furthermore, there is a pressing need to establish alternative oversight mechanisms to intervene when traditional controls fail, ensuring that disrupted connections within the system can be restored. Such mechanisms would help re-engage marginalized voices, reinforcing democratic integrity and resilience in the face of systemic breakdowns.

The table below summarizes the ideals of political vulnerability that are, implicitly or not, being addressed or highlighted by citizen assemblies' theory and practice and the ideal transformative experiences for citizens that this concept is advancing.

Political Vulnerability Addressed	**Transformative Experience Promoted**	**Design Device**	**Potential of reproducing or generating new political vulnerabilities**
Citizen inclusion in decision-making	Ensuring all citizens, regardless of background, can participate fully in the political decision-making.	Randomly selecting a representative population sample and providing logistical and financial support to remove participation barriers.	Random selection might not reflect broader societal views, undermining perceived legitimacy (Lafont, 2023)
Epistemic vulnerabilities	Empowering citizens with knowledge and critical thinking skills to make well-informed decisions.	Providing participants with credible expert information and fostering informed discussions through structured learning processes.	Potential information overload or bias in expert selection leads to skewed perspectives (Ferejohn, 2008)
Discursive vulnerabilities	Promoting equality in dialogue, allowing all voices to be heard and considered in deliberative processes.	Facilitated discussions to enforce inclusive norms, ensuring equal opportunities for contribution and acknowledgment.	Domination by certain voices due to existing social hierarchies, despite facilitation (Gerber et al., 2019)
Public deliberation and influence	Improve public deliberation, distill reasoned and informed arguments among the citizenry, and build the deliberative capacity of the system.	Engaging the general population through media campaigns, public sessions, digital forums, and referenda to validate and influence decisions.	Tokenism, if public influence does not lead to tangible decision-making power, frustrating participants (Lafont, 2023) and systemic disconnections (Feres, 2017).

Table 5: Vulnerabilities and Experiences in Citizen Assemblies. Source: Author.

2.3 Democratic innovations literature: key insights on experience and vulnerabilities

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I justified why the concepts of transformative or vital experience (Dewey, 1980) and vulnerabilities (Butler, 2009; 2015; 2021; Mackenzie, 2014; Cole, 2017) are promising for understanding how democratic innovations that foster citizen participation can promote growth and improvement among participants, ultimately leading to a bottom-up transformation of democracies. Through this theoretical reflection, I established the groundwork for constructing an experiential and critical interpretative framework. This framework aims to map the conditions under which the Global Citizens' Assembly enabled participants to undergo transformative democratic experiences or encounter unintentional political vulnerabilities. However, this proposal remained theoretical, and as John Dewey

argues, while it is desirable to create mechanisms that make democratic experiences occur "less blindly," there is no universal formula for how such experiences should unfold. A thorough analysis of the extensive literature on democratic innovations was necessary to identify practical hypotheses and lessons about experience and vulnerability before developing a robust methodology to analyze the Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis.

Table 6 below summarizes the main conceptions of political vulnerabilities and transformative democratic experiences presented by various approaches to theorizing and practicing democratic innovations. As illustrated, these concepts emphasize addressing the political vulnerabilities citizens face when excluded from decision-making processes on issues that affect them in representative democracies. Still, the approaches differ in terms of the specific political vulnerabilities they prioritize, such as the epistemic quality of public spheres or structural inequalities. In this regard, they also argue that democratic innovations should create diverse political opportunities for citizens to transform their relationships with other citizens, democracy, and the environment within a given context. This could include more loosely everyday interactions or participating in institutional interactions guided by deliberative norms.

Concept/Approach	Citizen Vulnerabilities Addressed	Transformative Experience	Potential Vulnerabilities
Top-down Reformatory Approaches			
Governmental Innovation for Responsiveness	Ineffective governance	Enhancing citizens' sense of being effectively governed by improving public service delivery and engaging citizens as "co-producers" of public services.	Superficial engagement without substantial impact on governance.
Governmental Engineering	Inadequate accountability	Creating new mechanisms for horizontal and vertical accountability to inform citizens and facilitate interaction.	Bureaucratic complexity that may alienate citizens.
Bottom-up Reformatory Approaches			
Governance-Driven Democratization and Institutional Activism	Ineffective governance and lack of connection in decision-making	Giving citizens greater influence over decision-making processes and bridging civil society and policymaking.	Dependence on political will and varying effectiveness across contexts.
Flexible Concepts	Lack of opportunities for political participation beyond elections (Accessibility Vulnerabilities)	Any experience where citizens experiment with new political roles in democracy and expand political grammar.	Risk of superficial or ineffective engagement.
Deliberative Concepts	Uninformed and unreflective participation; low-quality discourse	Enhancing citizens' capacity to produce informed, qualified, and creative solutions to collective problems.	Potential exclusion of disadvantaged citizens; epistemic inequality.

	(Epistemic and Discursive Vulnerability)		
Policy-Making Oriented (Smith's Concept)	Systematic disengagement from the political process (Decision-making vulnerabilities)	Institutions are specifically designed and connected to empowered spaces to allow citizens to influence policy-making processes.	Dependence on political will; variable effectiveness across contexts.
Systemic and Complex Concepts	Contextual and temporal constraints for political participation	Fostering continuous experimentation, reimagination, and hybrid forms of citizen engagement	Ambiguous outcomes; potential for negative consequences.
Bottom-up ContestatoryApproaches			
Critical and Agonistic Concepts	Marginalization and oppression	Continuous inquiry and exposure of power dynamics through respectful debates and transformation of social structures. Promotion of redistribution of wealth and social justice.	Deepening socio-political conflicts.
Socio-Technical Concepts	Equitable management of common-pool resources	Contextualizing dynamic socio-political interactions and democratic management of essential resources.	Bureaucratization and technocratic control; overlooking individual needs.

Table 6: Summary of Political Vulnerabilities and Democratic Experiences Idealized in Differing Approaches on Democratic Innovations. Source: Author.

In this thesis, democratic innovations are conceptualized as experiences of citizen participation that introduce qualitative differences in the democratic quality of relationships among those affected by a specific political problem and the world. By "world," I refer to any human or extra-human entity, sentient or non-sentient, whose relationship may have been altered as a result of a democratic participation process. From an empirical standpoint, this expansive and experiential concept serves as a framework to guide qualitative analysis of why and how certain participatory journeys enabled different citizens to undergo specific types of empowering democratic experiences and/or the reiteration or emergence of new political vulnerabilities. This concept is grounded in the following lessons from the literature review, which became premises for the development of this research.

The first literature review lesson and premise that grounds the concept and research on democratic innovations involves radicalizing the citizen-centered and bottom-up approach. This concept aligns with mainstream definitions of democratic innovation by expanding citizen roles beyond traditional voting and policy consumption. Democratic innovation is viewed as an experiential outcome of participatory events that reshape the quality of democratic relations. This perspective resonates with approaches such as Governance-Driven Democratization and Institutional Activism, which aim to grant citizens greater decision-making influence and bridge the gap between civil society and policymaking.

The second premise emphasizes the transformative impact of citizen participation. For participatory experiences to be considered innovations, they must introduce qualitative differences in democracies. The effects of these experiences cannot be predetermined and may

range from influencing political representatives to sustaining democratic systems through ordinary interactions. This aligns with deliberative concepts, which enhance citizens' capacity to generate informed, qualified, and creative solutions to collective problems.

The third premise highlights the significance of the conditions under which participatory processes occur. While analyzing the democratic qualities of participation events, it is crucial to consider the constraints and power relations that shape political experiences. Understanding these factors is essential for addressing vulnerabilities identified in various democratic innovations, such as bureaucratic complexity in Governmental Engineering or the risk of exclusion in Deliberative Concepts.

The fourth premise involves considerations of historicity, contextuality, and situationality. The experiential dimension of my concept requires examining these aspects of democratic innovations. This approach aligns with concepts of democratic innovation that aim to grasp the complexity of the social world and that foster continuous experimentation and hybrid forms of citizen engagement. Furthermore, this framework has the ambition to capture the spillover effects of participatory processes—effects that extend beyond discrete participatory events or institutions.

The fifth premise addresses power asymmetries in democratic innovations. A focus on experience necessitates attention to the embodied and social factors that enable or constrain participation. This aligns with works exploring power relations and suggests intersectionality as a lens for assessing democratic innovations. This approach is in synergy with agonistic concepts on democratic innovations, which address marginalization and oppression through continuous inquiry and exposure to power dynamics.

The sixth premise acknowledges the potential for negative outcomes and vulnerabilities that may arise within democratic innovations. Participatory experiences are susceptible to constraints and power relations, which may yield undesired consequences for citizens and democracies. This recognition is crucial for understanding potential pitfalls in various approaches, such as superficial engagement in top-down governmental innovations.

The seventh premise concerns methodological implications. This concept requires an abductive and critical methodology that accesses the perspectives and theories citizens construct to impart meaning to their experiences. This citizen-centered proposal systematically reconstructs and compares participatory experiences to interpret the factors leading to specific outcomes and consequences. Chapter 3 will outline my methodology, which is based on Grounded Theory and Constructivist methodologies.

In summary, these lessons and premises provide a nuanced understanding of how different approaches to democratic innovation address various political vulnerabilities and promote transformative experiences. By focusing on citizens' experiences and the conditions shaping them, we can better understand the potential and limitations of democratic innovations in fostering meaningful democratic engagement and addressing the complexities of contemporary governance.

3 VITAL EXPERIENCES AND VULNERABILITIES IN THE GLOBAL ASSEMBLY: METHODOLOGY

3.1 General research design

The primary goal of this thesis is to explore and analyze the emergence and impact of transformative democratic experiences among participants in the Global Assembly (GA) on the Climate and Ecological Crisis. Specifically, I aim to examine the conditions under which a transnational democratic initiative like the GA fosters vital experiences that profoundly enhance citizens' democratic engagement with themselves, others, and the environment. As Dewey suggests, living democratic experiences through political participation is crucial, as these transformed citizens are likely to spread their new approaches to collective problem-solving in all their interactions, thereby extending "the presence of democratic methods in all social relationships" (Dewey, 1939a, p. 225). However, the theoretical expectation is that the emergence or obstruction of such transformative experiences varies depending on the political vulnerabilities participants face in their journey, potentially hindering the bottom-up transformative potential of democratic innovations.

To meet the objectives guiding this thesis in the context of my case study, I needed to develop a research design primarily committed to comprehensively understanding how the participants of the GA perceived, named, and valued the conditions and consequences of the experiences and vulnerabilities they encountered during and after their participatory journey. Additionally, I aimed to develop an approach that addresses critiques concerning the overly abstract and insufficiently critical use of pragmatist concepts like vital experiences, particularly concerning the diversity and power imbalances that shape political life, as highlighted by Patricia Hill Collins (2012). My strategy was to adopt a qualitative interpretive research design[18], employing two versions of the Grounded Theory methodology—Normative and Experiential—to generate context-sensitive abductive[19] inferences about the conditions of

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[18] Qualitative-interpretivist research methodologies, in political science, are supported by an epistemology that resonates with Max Weber's (1922) theory of *social action*, conceptualizing it as fundamentally influenced by the meanings, expectations and capacities of individuals articulate material, symbolic and social networks. In this sense, by interpreting the concrete and symbolic landscapes that shape individuals' choices, motivations, and goals, researchers can gain insight into *how* and *why* specific social phenomena unfolded and presented certain qualities and characteristics in a context instead of many other possibilities. In this sense, for qualitative interpretivists, it is crucial to engage with accounts of lived experiences to ground sound interpretations about its conditions of possibility (Hay, 2006; Parsons, 2010; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Schwartz-Shea, 2015; Rhodes, 2017).

[19] According to Charles Peirce, abductive reasoning is a mode of inference that involves generating plausible explanations or hypotheses to account for observed phenomena. It differs from both inductive and deductive reasoning in several ways. Inductive reasoning consists of drawing general conclusions from specific observations, relying on accumulating previous evidence to establish probability. Deductive reasoning, conversely, applies

emergence and the consequences of vital experiences and vulnerabilities as lived by participants in the GA from their standpoints.

In this chapter, I will present the qualitative interpretive research design constructed based on the premises and commitments outlined above. I will begin by providing key details of this thesis's case study: the GA on the Climate and Ecological Crisis. Drawing on Flyvbjerg's (2009, apud Rolland and Herstad, 2000) typology, I argue that this case study can be framed as a "critical" case study, defined as a strategically chosen case aimed at testing and potentially falsifying or verifying existing theories due to its unique context and outcomes. Insights derived from a critical case can enable the researcher to draw logical conclusions, such as "if this is true for this case, then it is true for all cases," or conversely, "if this is not true for this case, then it is not true for any other case either" (Flyvbjerg, 2009, apud Rolland and Herstad, 2000, p. 6). The GA case fits this typology because it was the first citizen assembly to unite participants from the most diverse and precarious backgrounds during a pandemic, engaging them in online deliberations that were heavily dependent on technology and language capacities (English) to learn and deliberate on a complex issue over an extended period (three months). In this sense, this case offers a privileged opportunity to explore the conditions of emergence and consequences of vital experiences and vulnerabilities among participating citizens.

To elucidate the GA within this thesis, I began by delineating its objectives and foundational aims, considering its vision of "giving everyone a seat at the global governance table" (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p. 25). I then explored the decentralized nature of its structure, emphasizing the significance of its Core Assembly events, which engaged 100 randomly selected participants[20] from around the world to learn and deliberate on the climate and ecological crisis. While presenting the Core Assembly, I outlined the roles and functions of individuals involved in the organization (core and delivery team), the participatory process (knowledge committees, facilitators, notetakers), and the support of citizens' participatory journey (cluster facilitators, community hosts, and translators). This organizational exploration set the stage for an in-depth presentation of the Core Assembly's events and

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general principles or premises to particular cases, deriving logical consequences. Abductive reasoning, however, takes a different approach: "Abduction makes its start from the facts, without, at the outset, having any particular theory in view, though it is motived by the feeling that a theory is needed to explain the surprising facts. (…) Abduction seeks a theory. Induction seeks for facts. (…) The mode of suggestion by which, in abduction, the facts suggest the hypothesis is by resemblance—the resemblance of the facts to the consequences of the hypothesis." (Peirce, 1998, p.106).

[20] According to the GA executive report (2022, p. 10), of the 100 participants selected, 98 remained engaged in the process until its conclusion.

journey, divided into five blocks totaling 68 hours of citizen learning and deliberation, spread over three months in 2021. Lastly, I considered that, from the organizers' perspective, the culmination of the GA was the collective production of the "People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth" and its presentation at COP-26.

After introducing the case study in Section 3.2, the chapter ultimately presents the research design tailored for this thesis in Sections 3.3 and 3.4. The table below succinctly encapsulates the stages, strategies, and tools employed throughout the data generation process on the GA, focusing primarily on narratives of experiences and vulnerabilities encountered by participants during and after their participatory journey. It also outlines the methods used to analyze, compare, and draw abductive inferences from these data.

<table>
<tr><th></th><th>Stage 1</th><th>Stage 2</th><th>Stage 3</th><th>Stage 4</th><th>Stage 5</th></tr>
<tr><td>Data Gen. and Analysis Step</td><td>Data Generation</td><td rowspan="2">Sociodemographic analysis of interviews</td><td>Experiential coding of interviews</td><td>Categorization of experiential codes</td><td>Weave “analytic histories”</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Methodology, Methods and Analytic Tools</td><td>Grounded Normative Theory</td><td colspan="3">Grounded Experiential and Normative Theory</td></tr>
<tr><td>In-depth semi-structured interviews</td><td colspan="4">Qualitative Data Analysis Software Tools</td></tr>
</table>

Table 7: Methodological phases and tools of the GA experiential analysis. Source: Author.

In Section 3.3, I outlined the data generation process of this thesis. The initial aspect I focused on was the “ethnographic sensibility” (Schatz, 2009, p. 5) used in generating and interpreting data related to GA participants' experiences within the GA. This approach stemmed from my immersive role as a notetaker during its deliberative sessions, which not only provided data from my direct participant but also fostered a nuanced understanding of the dynamics and intricacies of the assembly's design, its demands, and the processes that impacted the lives of the assembly members.

Next, I detailed the criteria and strategy employed to conduct 14 in-depth semi-structured interviews, each averaging one and a half hours in length, with assembly members from the Global South who participated in the GA. This sampling strategy was justified by feminist critiques of deliberative democracy and the four core commitments of Grounded Normative Theory[21] (GNT) (Ackerly et al., 2021). For instance, epistemic inclusion, one of

[21] GNT is defined as a qualitative approach in political theory "to construct empirically driven normative concepts that aim to mitigate political and epistemical injustices" (Coulthard & Simpson, 2016; Ackerly et al., 2021; Rossi, 2023). It emphasizes the importance of grounding normative concepts in "the lived experiences and situated knowledges of marginalized groups" through a process of "systematic and critical empirical data generation and analysis" (Mansbridge, 1983; Curato, 2019). Unique to GNT is its aim to "diplomatically engage with oppressed and disregarded modes of existing together" to support the self-determination of historically marginalized groups (Fuji-Johnson, 2022; Asembaum, 2022).

the four core commitments[22] of GNT (Ackerly et al., 2021, pp. 5, 7–8), was a guiding principle in the data generation phase of this thesis. In essence, this normative commitment requires creating strategies to include and prioritize the experiences and perspectives of the most disadvantaged and oppressed social groups in analyzing political phenomena. Consequently, the data generation strategy involved conducting interviews with GA participants from the Global South, as they arguably faced heightened participatory vulnerabilities due to the GA's design and demands, as well as epistemic injustices stemming from their marginalized positions. These challenges included extensive technological requirements, the significant time needed to digest comprehensive materials and participate in regular deliberative sessions, the selection of English as the primary language, and additional design constraints revealed by the research.

On the other hand, in alignment with GNT's principle of comprehensiveness—which calls for systematic empirical data collection to chart the diverse interests, claims, and actors involved in moral issues—the interviewees were selected to represent a diverse sample across geographic and demographic lines, acknowledging the internal diversity of the Global South. Additionally, still based on comprehensiveness, this thesis strategically employed 24 interviews with the GA's Central Circle and Delivery Team (15) and representatives from "cluster facilitators'" organizations (9) that supported assembly members. This approach complemented the insights and perspectives our primary interviewees could not provide, aiming to mitigate bias and enhance the comprehensiveness of the research.

Furthermore, reflecting the GNT principles of recursivity and epistemic accountability, interviews were conducted in participants' native languages and structured to allow them to describe their GA involvement and its impact on their own terms, without imposing predefined notions of vital experiences or vulnerabilities. Recursivity involves formulating and adjusting normative assertions through continuous interactions with factual data, participants, contexts, and theory, while epistemic accountability entails recognizing and addressing potential power disparities inherent in the research process.

[22] According to Ackerly and colleagues (2021), GNT operates on "four core overlapping commitments": comprehensiveness, which calls for employing "systematic empirical data collection to chart the diverse interests, claims, and actors" involved in moral issues; recursivity, which involves formulating and adjusting normative assertions through "continuous interactions with factual data, participants, contexts, and theory"; epistemological inclusion, which urges consideration of how "different methods or asymmetry in standpoints" may exclude or suppress alternative perspectives; and epistemic accountability, emphasizing the importance of recognizing "possible power disparities inherent in the research process" (Ackerly et al., 2021, pp. 5, 7-8).

Based on our interviewees' perspectives, the following sections outline the analytical process, methods, and tools used to generate abductive inferences regarding the conditions and consequences of participatory experiences and vulnerabilities in the GA. To ensure a systematic and meticulous analysis of our data[23], I integrated the core commitments of GNT with the methodologically focused analytical approaches of the Constructivist or Experiential version of Grounded Theory[24] (GT).

Experiential GT employs a series of data interpretation, coding, and categorization techniques, combined with a "constant comparison" of them, to produce abductive inferences about the conditions and consequences of a social process experienced by a group. The expected outcome is an “analytic story” that weaves together relations of dependency and consequentiality among a set of experiences, enabling a comprehensive understanding of a social process (Charmaz, 2006, p. 76).

In Section 3.4, I delineated the five distinct phases of data analysis undertaken in this thesis. The process began with mapping and examining the sociodemographic characteristics of the research subjects. This initial phase set the stage for a systematic approach to coding and categorizing the meanings and experiences of the Global Assembly (GA) as narrated in the interviews. The process culminated in applying critical tools designed to construct the analytical narrative that will be unfolded in subsequent chapters, aiming to provide a thorough account of the GA process. The steps of this analytical journey are succinctly captured in Table 9, which outlines each phase, its objectives, and the methods employed to ensure a rich, nuanced understanding of the data corpus:

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[23] Regarding data analysis, GNT researchers declare that they embrace multiple possibilities, either quantitative, qualitative, or mixed (Ackerly et al., 2021; Fuji Johnson, 2022; Asenbaum, 2022). Also, they claim that GNT can take either inductive or deductive logic of analysis as long it is based on an interaction with minority groups to "critically engage existing theoretical understandings of a concept" (Ackerly et al., 2021, p.21). However, while there is a focus on presenting lists of values and methodological principles to define GNT, there is no proposition or reflection about the concrete methods and analytical strategies necessary to promote the promised systematic and controlled interpretations of their data.

[24] In Political Science, Constructive or Experiential Grounded Theory (GT) is a recognized qualitative-interpretive methodology that present important tools to conduct a progressive bottom-up comparative analysis to develop theoretical concepts that aim to comprehend a “puzzling” political process (Vromen, 2010, p.259; Schwartz-Shea; Yanow, 2012, p.38; Yanow, 2015, p.101; Anselm, 2016, p.96). Through abductive reasoning, constructive grounded theorists navigate back and forth empirical data, systematic interpretation, and relevant academic literature, as the recursivity value of GNT proposes. Moreover, articulating the strategy of “constant comparison” with “strong reflexivity” on researcher interpretations, GNT’s demand for comprehensiveness, epistemic inclusion and accountability can be achieved (Chamaz, 2014). By these strategies, it’s possible to uncover concealed meanings and actions, scrutinizing intentions, policies, and practices and “evaluating the means and ends flowing from them”, fostering the critical quality (Morse et al., 2021, p.175). In this sense, we can also promote a "decolonizing act" in our research if we use GT to revise oppressive “Western understandings of science and knowledge” (Kandasamy et al., 2017, p.2).

Coding technique	Objective	How it was done
Sociodemographic analysis of interviews	Generate sociodemographic data of each interviewee to distinguish each interview as a means to ground intersectional analysis of experiences lived in the GA.	Gather data relevant to the research question and input it into CAQDAS tools, registering the diverse sociodemographic variables for each interview for the later comparative analysis.
Initial coding	Segmenting and coding of discursive data into three distinct units: • Lived experiences lived in or related to GA journey. • Meanings attributed to GA interactions and events. • Propositions for improving future editions of the GA.	a) Units of analysis: each interview line or strongly, connected set of lines, with particular attention to words, metaphors, emotions, context, and time markers. b) Summarize meanings, actions, and lived experiences with labels or significant terms expressed by the research participants (in-vivo codes). c) Use "gerunds" in coding labels to maintain the processual quality of experiences (e.g., experiencing public speaking anxiety). This will be better explained latter.
Focused coding	Review and consolidation of initial codes into a set of clear, concise, and accurate codes. .	a) Units of analysis: Initial codes. b) Refine codes (combining, splitting, or changing definitions) by comparing the characteristics of the different experienced narratives they encompass. c) Employing memos and diagramming code relationships to produce, when possible, sub-codes that differentiate the sources and conditions of coded experiences.
Theoretical categories	Construction of categories that can best aggregate the different sets of codes considering: a) The context that they refer to or where they occurred; b) The type of consequence the experiential code subsumes; c) The "area of impact" of the experience;	a) Units of analysis: categories and codes. a) Organizing the codes into three primary categories: meanings, propositions, and experiential codes. b) Grouping of those three primary categories based on their relevance to specific phases or contexts of the GA. c) For the experiential codes, categorize them into four categories: Vital Experiences, Challenging Experiences, Adverse Experiences, and Response-abilities. d) Distinguish the "impact area" of experiences, that is, if they were limited to a person or organism or if they were extended to other persons and environment.
Weave of a theoretical analytic history	Weave an "analytic story" that interlinks categories and codes into a cohesive narrative, elucidating conditions, relationships, and consequences of experiences that constitute a given sociopolitical process.	a) Units of analysis: categories and codes. b) Co-occurrence analysis of categories and codes to confirm or identify patterns and singularities in the emergence of experiences in each phase of GA. c) The CAQDAS software crosstabs tool was employed to identify qualitative, relevant correlations between the intersection of interviewees' social markers and the types of experiences they lived in the GA. d) Apply Dewey's conceptual characteristics and conditions of vital experiences to organize and connect the experiential codes and categories to weave an "analytical history" that presents a comprehensive account of our interviewees' GA journeys. e) Use of axial-political categories, like "democratic recognition" and "political translation", to connect the emergent findings with broader academic literature.

Table 8: Analytical steps of codification, categorization and weaving of this analytical stories for this thesis. Source: Author.

Finally, Section 3.5 delves into the credibility criteria and limitations of the research design. It presents the specific research criteria of qualitative methodologies, which emphasize values like "philosophical rigor" and "credibility" over the traditional quantitative metrics of validity and generalizability. While this chapter demonstrates this thesis's adherence to high standards of qualitative research, I also acknowledge its key limitations: the timing of interviews conducted after the events, potential inaccuracies in translated interviews, and a strategic focus on participants from the Global South over those from the Global North. This focus is attributed to resource limitations and an interest in exploring the GA's impact on individuals more likely to experience participatory disadvantages due to the GA's design choices and demands.

3.2 The case study

3.2.1 Global Assembly's objectives and design

The Global Assembly (GA) is a civil society-led initiative spearheaded by activists, academics, and NGOs. Conceptualized in the Global North and predominantly funded by philanthropic organizations from the same region, it was established as the first global citizens' assembly to give "everyone on Earth a seat at the global governance table, through new global governance infrastructure" (Global Assembly Team, 2022b, p. 9).

The first edition of the GA, held in 2021, is the focus of this thesis. In this pioneering run, the GA organizers aimed to "inject energy and civic momentum into the global UN climate negotiations," specifically targeting the 26th Conference of the Parties (COP26) (Global Assembly Team, 2022b, p. 6). However, recognizing the experimental nature of this transnational democratic initiative, the organizers framed the initial edition as a pilot or proof of concept, targeting additional specific objectives. These included: a) designing a methodology for conducting a global citizens' assembly; b) forming a global network of organizations capable of running a global citizens' assembly; c) promoting institutional support essential for influencing global climate decision-making; and d) fostering engagement methods to increase awareness and participation in a global citizens' assembly (Global Assembly Team, 2022b, p. 9).

In terms of design, the GA was structured around three components (Global Assembly Team, 2022b, p. 10). The first component, the Core Assembly, consisted of a series of learning and deliberative events in which assembly members, randomly selected from around the world, gathered to discuss and propose answers to the question: "How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?" (Global Assembly Team, 2022b, p.

5). The second component, the Community Assemblies, involved a series of self-organized events that ran parallel to the Core Assembly. These events could be organized by anyone, anywhere, using the same learning materials as the Core Assembly and guided by a “dedicated toolkit” (Global Assembly Team, 2022b, p. 13). Finally, the Cultural Wave sought to engage artists and creators worldwide to develop works expressing the ideas of the Global Assembly and the climate and ecological crisis, aiming to reach broader audiences through popular culture (Global Assembly Team, 2022b, p. 15).

While the Community Assemblies and the Cultural Wave were significant features of the GA, they will not be discussed in this thesis. Instead, the focus will be on delineating the conditions under which the Core Assembly events promoted vital experiences in participants' lives, as well as examining how participatory vulnerabilities—particularly those fostered or intensified by the design choices and demands of the Core Assembly—created positive and/or negative obstacles to the emergence of those vital experiences. Next, I provide further details on the Core Assembly.

3.2.2 Core Assembly participant selection methodology and devices

To uphold the principle of democratic inclusivity, the GA organizers employed a civic lottery method to generate a stratified random selection of assembly members. This approach aimed to achieve a (near) representative sample reflecting global demographic diversity (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p. 51).

Initially, 100 locations worldwide were identified using an algorithm based on the Gridded Population of the World (v4) database. The algorithm considered factors such as geographic dispersion, age, gender, education, and attitudes toward climate change. It selected random points on the globe weighted by population, with a two-step capping process to prevent overrepresentation of specific regions or countries (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, pp. 53–54). A live lottery event was held on June 24, 2021, during which the algorithm's selection process was publicly streamed. The event explained the methodology and generated 100 points, designating the approximate locations of assembly members. Notably, the civic lottery designated locations in only 49 out of the 193 countries recognized by the UN, and no assembly members were chosen from Oceania and the Pacific Islands—regions deeply affected by the climate crisis.

Figure 1: Map displaying the 100 assembly member locations selected during the live sortition event. Source: Global Assembly executive report (2022a, p.54).

Following the civic lottery, GA collaborators worldwide, known as cluster facilitators, initiated the process of engaging local organizations as community hosts. These hosts were tasked with recruiting potential assembly members near the 100 geographic locations identified in the lottery. They employed two primary methods: in-person recruitment, which included on-street and door-to-door approaches, and online snowballing, which utilized telephone-based methods. Recruitment protocols were established to ensure a globally representative and unbiased sample. For instance, individuals affiliated with the community host organization or their associates were prohibited from being selected. Additionally, self-selection was avoided to counteract biases that might arise from factors such as engagement levels, access to information, and comfort in public participation settings (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, pp. 70–72). In the empirical chapters, I will highlight political vulnerabilities that emerged due to the necessary adaptations and impracticalities of following this protocol.

In the final stage of assembly member selection, a second civic lottery was conducted using a pool of 675 potential members recruited by community hosts. This pool served as the algorithm's input dataset, aligning with global demographic metrics on gender, age, educational attainment, and perspectives on the climate and ecological crisis. The algorithm aimed to select one person from each geographic location, closely matching the specified demographic characteristics. Following the algorithmic selection, community hosts confirmed the participation of the chosen assembly members and facilitated the completion of contracts (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p. 73).

3.2.3 Core assembly decentralized structure

The GA adopted a decentralized structure, drawing inspiration from principles such as "holacracy" and "distributed leadership" (Global Assembly Team, 2021a, p. 36). The core idea was that organizers and collaborators would work in autonomous circles, each handling specific roles and responsibilities.

At the center of the governance structure, as represented in the image below, was The Central Circle, which served as the coordinating hub for different circles. It met weekly to discuss strategy and alignment. Closely associated with the Central Circle was The Core Delivery Team, which played crucial roles in areas such as communication, finances, and the technology supporting GA's political interactions (Global Assembly Team, 2021a, p. 35). Adjacent to the Central Circle was the Governance Circle, which included The Knowledge and Wisdom Advisory Committee. This committee played a key role in shaping the design of the learning journey. It also included the Global Governance and Participation Advisory Committee, which guided the deliberation process (Global Assembly Team, 2021a, p. 77). More directly involved in the deliberation process was the Hosting Circle, comprising members from 34 countries responsible for the practical facilitation and notetaking during deliberative sessions (Global Assembly Team, 2021a, p. 35).

The GA established the Decentralization Circle to support, coordinate, connect, and synchronize all 100 citizen participants in the assembly. This working group consisted of nine Cluster Facilitators—organizations already engaged in citizen participation within their respective sociopolitical contexts. They were selected to coordinate the 100 participants of the Global Assembly, who were divided into ten geographic-linguistic clusters to streamline the process.

Figure 2: Geographic distribution of participants and linguistic and geographic cluster formation. Source: Global Assembly Executive Report (2022a, p.11).

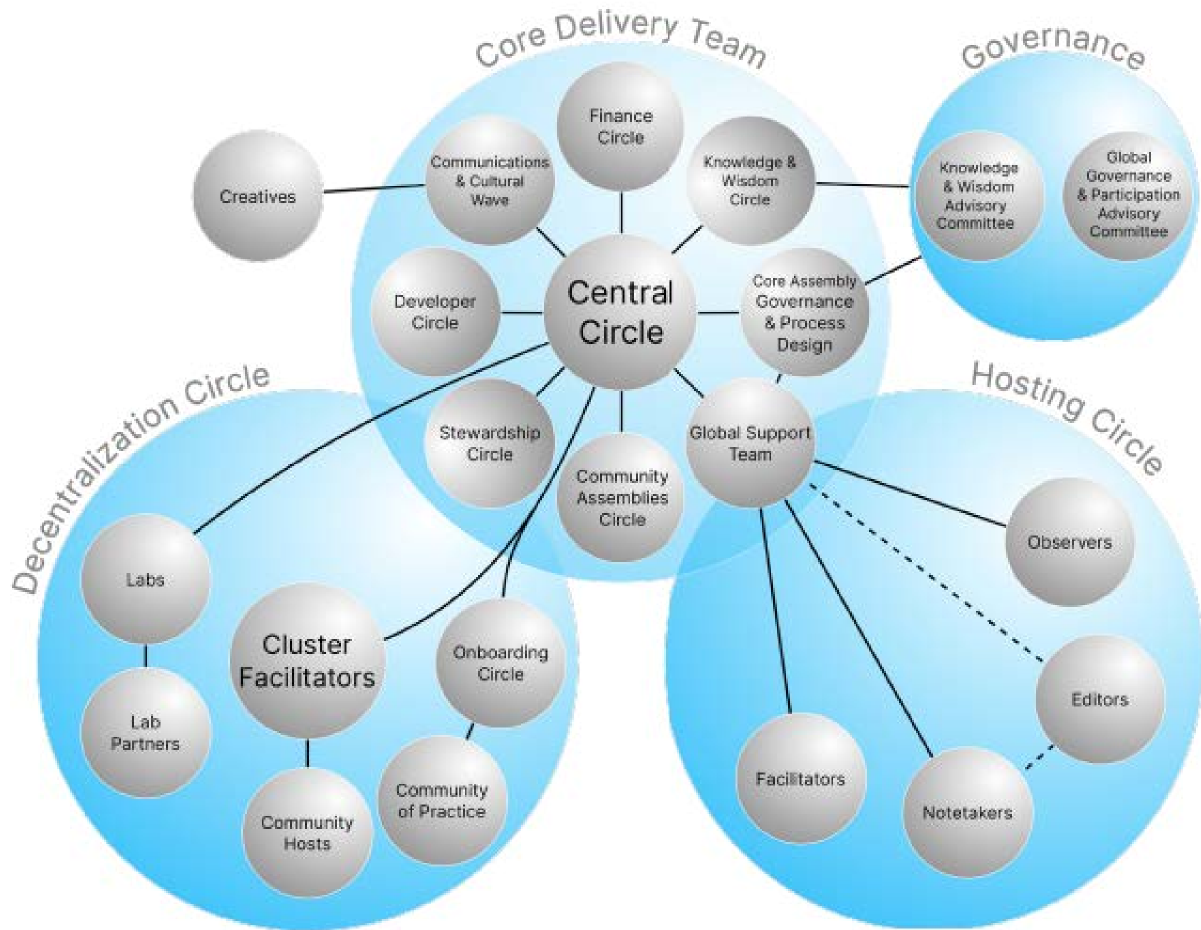

Figure 3: Map displaying the 100 assembly member locations selected during the live sortition event. Source: Global Assembly executive report.

Cluster facilitators also played a crucial role in recruiting 100 community hosts, spread across 49 countries, who would maintain closer contact with the recruited assembly members. These community hosts, representing trusted local organizations, were selected within a 200 km radius of the lottery-selected points (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, pp. 63–64). Once contracted, the community hosts participated in training sessions organized by cluster facilitators to ensure they could effectively support assembly members (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p. 67). Other contributors, particularly translators, were also engaged in the process through these community hosts.

Finally, the table below summarizes the key roles and functions of organizers and collaborators in the Global Assembly (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, pp. 16, 21, 37–38, 106).

Central coordination roles (Roles held by Central Circle and Core Delivery Team)	
Central Circle	A group of 10 representatives from the Global Assembly's founding organizations was entrusted with overseeing its overarching strategy, development, and administration.
Core Delivery Team	A team comprising members of the Central Circle and additional individuals tasked with the hands-on implementation of the Global Assembly
Process Team	A subset of the Governance and Process Design Circle responsible for translating the high-level process into Session Plans in time for Core Assembly Breakout and Plenary Sessions.
Global Support Team	Composed to centrally steer the Hosting Circle and troubleshoot any real-time issues with attendance or participation.
Hosting Coordinator	An administrative role interfacing between multiple teams to support the practical hosting of deliberations.
Governance Circle	
Knowledge and Wisdom Advisory Committee	The KWAC aimed to guarantee that the educational experience for all participants, encompassing both the Core Assembly and Community Assemblies, was grounded in the most current and reliable evidence.
Global Governance and Participation Advisory Committee	Guided the Global Assembly on process and governance. It influenced decisions on the deliberation process, global governance integration, connections with social movements, establishing a permanent global citizens' assembly, and evaluation.
Hosting Circle	
56 “Hosting personnel“ (Facilitators, Notetakers, and Editors)	Responsible for the implementation and documentation of deliberations in Core Assembly sessions.
Two Plenary Co-Facilitators	Responsible for leading Plenary Sessions.
Observers	Responsible for observing Plenary Sessions and providing objective internal feedback
Descentralization circle	
10 “Cluster Facilitators”	A civil society organization and/or research center, along with its staff or representatives, that oversaw the administration of a Cluster. Operating as a crucial element of managerial decentralization, they facilitated distributed leadership throughout the Global Assembly and alleviated the administrative load on the Central Circle
100 community hosts from 49 countries	Local community organizations, located near points selected through the global location lottery, played a crucial role in the Core Assembly. Their responsibilities included recruiting potential assembly members, translating and contextualizing information materials, promoting the Global Assembly, and facilitating assembly member participation through various means such as transportation, internet connectivity, and technical support.
Community of Practice	Containing around 85 individuals from over 36 countries who assisted in several aspects of the initiative such as the recruitment of community hosts
23 Lab Partners	Testing, refining, and finalizing materials and methods used for the assembly of the core.

Table 9: Teams and roles in the decentralized structure of the Global Assembly. Source: Global Assembly Executive Report (2022a).

3.2.4 The Core Assembly process

The Core Assembly was a series of learning and deliberative events that gathered 100[25] citizens from around the world from October to December 2021 to reflect and propose an answer to the question: "How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair

[25] From a planned participant count of 100, 98 successfully completed the entire process.

and effective manner?" (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p.3). The assembly involved 68 hours of citizen political engagement, divided into 20 interactive sessions distributed in 12 weeks (id.). Regarding interactive and deliberative processes, the Core Assembly was divided into five blocks that we will discuss further.

The GA journey unfolded in five distinct blocks, each contributing to the participants' comprehensive understanding of the climate and ecological crisis, deliberative discussions, and collaboration.

In Block 1, assembly members embarked on their learning journey, delving into the crisis's fundamentals and sharing personal experiences, creating Conversation Principles (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p.123). Block 2 advanced their understanding by exploring scenarios, pathways, and principles, guiding them to generate inputs for COP-26 submissions (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p.124). Moving to Block 3, participants focused on refining their submissions, incorporating insights from additional speakers and witnesses, and engaging with the Information Booklet and Supplemental Workbook materials (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p.126). The main achievement of this block was the first draft of the "People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth.”.

In Block 4, the learning and deliberative sessions had a break, and assembly members focused on observing COP26 events, reflecting on experiences, and identifying themes for further discussion. Finally, in Block 5, they discussed their COP-26 observations and “learned about and deliberated on the top three most popular topics requested by their peers in Block 4”. Those discussions also produced iterative reviews on the People's Declaration drafted in Block 3, including amendments and new clauses, culminating in the finalization of the declaration through majority voting (ibid., p.130).

Block 1 (October 7-13): Understanding the Situation	Learning Phase. This stage involved acquiring data on climate and ecological crises, sharing life stories from personal perspectives, and developing conversation principles.
Block 2 (October 13-20): Reviewing Scenarios, Paths, and Principles	Continuation of the learning process, focusing on governance and potential impacts of climate projections. Voting on the conversation principles developed in Block 1.
Block 3 (October 21-30): Developing Submissions for COP-26	Generation of content for the initial version of the "People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth." A majority vote approved the content and title of the declaration.
Block 4 (November 1-20) Participation and observation at COP26	Online observation of COP26 proceedings. Raising issues for further discussion.
Block 5 (December 4-18) Reassess commitments and future agenda-setting	Learning and deliberation on key issues from COP26. Iterative revision and amendment of the People’s Declaration were approved in the final session by a majority vote.

Table 10: Process and Blocks of the Global Assembly. Source: Global Assembly Executive Report (2022, p.10).

Block 1	Section 1.1B – 7/10	Plenária 1.2P – 09/10	Section 1.3B – 12/10	Section 1.4B – 13/10
	Conversation Principles AM Personal Stories	Reading and discussion of learning material	Reading and discussion of learning material	Reading and discussion of learning material
Block 2	**Section 2.1B – 14/10**	**Plenária 2.2P – 16/10**	**Section 2.3B – 19/10**	**Section 1.4B – 20/10**
	Reading and discussion of learning material	Reading and discussion of learning material	Lived Testimonies/Experts Recommendations for COP-26	Lived Testimonies/Experts Recommendations for COP-26
Block 3	**Section 3.1B – 21/10**	**Plenária 3.2P – 23/10**	**Section 3.3B – 26/10**	**Section 3.4P – 30/10**
	Lived Testimonies/Experts Recommendations for COP-26	Lived Testimonies/Experts Consolidation of Recommendations for COP-26	Discussion and voting on the GA issue and consolidated vision Consolidation of submissions for COP	Voting on the title and each clause of the COP 26 submissions
Block 4	**COP26 November 1-12**	**Section 4.1B – 16/11**	**Section 4.2P – 20/11**	
	Observation and submission of reflections by AMs	Reflection on COP Proposal of themes for Block 5	Reflection on COP Proposal of themes for Block 5	
Block 5	**Section 5.1P – 04/12**	**Section 5.2B – 07/12**	**Section 5.3P – 11/12**	**Section 5.4P – 14/12**
	Reflection on COP Discussion of the People's Declaration	Reflection on COP Discussion of the People's Declaration	Discussion of the themes chosen by AMs	Consolidation of the People's Declaration
	Section 5.5B – 16/12	**Section 5.6P – 18/12**		
	Consolidation of the People's Declaration	Voting on the final version of the People's Declaration		

Table 11: Distribution of blocks and deliberative sessions of the Core Assembly. Source: Author.

3.2.5 Global Assembly's main impacts and outputs

Overall, the complexity and scale of the climate emergency, coupled with the transnational nature of the Global Assembly (GA), led its organizers to aim for diverse impacts on the public sphere. It was proposed that the GA should (Global Assembly, 2022, p. 30): a) encourage governments and powerful actors to take practical action against the climate emergency; b) motivate ordinary citizens to reflect, change habits, and engage in collective action for the environment; and c) demonstrate to governments and transnational bodies the existence of alternative decision-making processes for addressing environmental issues.

In addition to the Community Assemblies, the Cultural Wave, and communication strategies in both social and traditional media, the GA's most significant impact was the presentation of the *People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth* at COP-26. This opportunity was crucial for fulfilling the GA's purpose, enhancing its visibility, and maximizing its impact. It also held significant political and subjective importance for the assembly members, as it validated and recognized their efforts in co-creating the document through more than 60 hours of deliberative interactions.

In summary, the GA's connection and engagement with COP-26 occurred in two distinct ways (Global Assembly Team, 2022, pp. 225–230): a) through the presentation and testimony of selected GA participants via digital connection to COP-26 (at least two events); b) through the in-person participation of GA organizers, who hosted tables and panels to present and explain the GA's mode of operation (at least four events). It is worth noting that the GA also planned for its members to attend other climate-themed conferences in 2022, such as UNEA-5 (Kenya), Stockholm+50 (Sweden), and PeaceOneDay Climate Action Live (Online).

3.3 Data generation

The primary objective of this thesis is to map the experiential consequences of participating in the GA from the standpoint of its assembly members and to understand the conditions under which this democratic innovation fostered politically significant vital experiences in their lives. That said, as discussed in the theoretical chapter, the conditions for the emergence of vital experiences extend beyond Dewey's criteria, such as the fulfillment of an impulse to realize needs or the establishment of a new relationship with the environment (Dewey, 1980, p. 58). Drawing on theorists like Patricia Hill Collins (2012) and Judith Butler (2009), we also recognize that the occurrence and characteristics of these vital experiences are likely to vary depending on the quality of vulnerabilities faced by assembly members during their GA journey.

To mitigate bias and potential harm arising from representing the experiences and vulnerabilities of others—a concern highlighted by critical theorists like Alysson Cole (2016)—this thesis is committed to understanding how GA participants themselves named, valued, and described their participatory journey, challenges, and transformations.

In line with the objectives and premises outlined above, the primary data corpus of this thesis consists of a set of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with GA participants. These were supplemented by: a) participant observation conducted by the researcher while acting as a notetaker during GA deliberative sessions; b) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with GA organizers and collaborators; and c) accessible official documents, questionnaires, and other materials generated by the Global Assembly.

3.3.1 GA participant-observation and ethnographic sensibility[26]

Although the focus of this thesis is the analysis of the assembly members' experiences in the Global Assembly (GA), my own experience as one of the notetakers in the GA proved vital in many respects, particularly in helping me develop an ethnographic sensibility. By ethnographic sensibility, I mean an interpretative approach that "cares—with the possible emotional engagement that implies—to glean the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality," fostering the ability to explore the dilemmas and complexities of a sociopolitical process with a more comprehensive and critical perspective (Schatz, 2009, p. 5).

Before this research, I participated in a global selection process to identify candidates to contribute to the Global Assembly as either facilitators or notetakers for its deliberative sessions. My application, which involved submitting documentation and a CV via email, led to my selection as a notetaker. In this role, I was assigned the specific responsibility of supporting and documenting the activities of one of the GA's twenty small deliberation groups, or breakout rooms. Each group consisted of five citizens who engaged in learning and deliberation over the course of a week, culminating in plenary sessions with the entire assembly of 100 members every Saturday (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p. 100).

As a notetaker, my responsibilities included preparing translated educational content for the members of my assigned breakout group and creating detailed records of their learning and deliberative processes over a three-month period. After each session, I synthesized the key discussions and outcomes into a format that could be easily used by editors for further analysis and summary. This included documenting the assembly members' learning experiences, deliberative interactions, points of agreement and disagreement, and any questions that arose. Additionally, I provided technical support to the breakout group, addressing any issues that emerged, and offered general assistance to the facilitators as needed (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, p. 23).

Throughout my participation in the GA, I maintained a journal containing detailed notes and reflective observations on the journey of the assembly members in my breakout room. That said, in this thesis, I will use insights from my GA experience as supplementary information to

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[26] Edward Schatz (2009, p.5-8) articulates the distinction between ethnography as a method—specifically, participant observation—and as a sensibility to sidestep debates over the criteria for ideal ethnographic research, such as the requisite duration of community engagement or the need to immerse oneself in an external culture. He argues for the importance of developing an ethnographic sensibility that prioritizes understanding people's perspectives and the meanings they attach to their experiences. By valuing emotional engagement and a willingness to learn from a variety of sources, an ethnographic sensibility enriches research, offering deeper insights into human experiences. Schatz's perspective highlights the evolving nature of ethnography, advocating for flexibility and depth in studying the interconnected social world.

specific topics in the interview analysis presented in the following pages. The decision to prioritize interview data stems from the thesis's aim to center the assembly members as the primary narrators and theorists of their experiences with the Global Assembly. My role is to reconstruct, analyze, and draw connections between their perspectives, making abductive inferences based on their reflections about the conditions and consequences of their GA experiences. Relying on research participants and their subjective accounts of their lived GA experiences aims to enhance the complexity of the analysis and mitigate biases and harms associated with representing others' political experiences and vulnerabilities, as discussed in Chapter 1.

In this sense, the most significant contribution of my participant-observation experience within the Global Assembly to this thesis was the development of an ethnographic sensibility regarding the case study and research subjects. This sensibility has enabled me to identify important aspects and topics to include in the interview script, which served as the primary tool for data generation. It has also deepened my understanding and interpretation of the interviewees' meanings, propositions, and experiences, allowing for a richer contextualization of the Global Assembly's diverse impacts on their lives. This has provided a nuanced perspective on the collective and individual transformations engendered by this unique deliberative process.

3.3.2 Generating data through in-depth interviews and guided by Grounded Normative Theory (GNT)

The Global Assembly was evaluated by an independent international research team led by Professor Nicole Curato from the University of Canberra. The team comprised individuals with varying levels of involvement in the Global Assembly (GA), ranging from those entirely external to the process to others, like myself, who were directly involved but not engaged in any decision-making related to the GA. In addition to accessing the complete database and records generated by the GA organizers—such as recordings of deliberative sessions and surveys conducted with citizens at different stages of the Core Assembly—the evaluation team also produced its own data.

As a member of the GA evaluation team, I had the opportunity to co-create the interview script and conduct a significant portion of the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with organizers, collaborators, and participating citizens of the Global Assembly. Within this process, I was specifically part of the group tasked with mapping the disadvantages and political asymmetries that emerged during the Core Assembly journey. Still, the concepts and

interpretative frameworks of *vital experiences* and *vulnerabilities* were exclusively developed for this thesis.

The evaluation team's first step in generating and accessing data was to secure approval from the University of Canberra's Human Research Ethics Committee (202210374). In line with the Ethics Committee's guidelines and the GA organizers' requirements, one of the data-sharing agreements was to ensure the anonymity of all research participants in any documents produced by our work. The team also decided to anonymize the countries of origin of the interviewees. This decision was made because this transnational democratic innovation typically involved only one or two participants from each country, making them susceptible to being traced and identified. In this thesis, I have used fictitious names to distinguish between interviewees.

In the second step of data generation, given the research's limited resources, the group I was part of established a sampling criterion for interviewing assembly members worldwide. Drawing on feminist theories and empirical research critical of deliberative forums, we intentionally focused on interviewing citizens we identified as potentially more disadvantaged by the GA's design. As discussed in the introduction of this chapter, this decision aligns with the GNT principle of epistemological inclusion, which emphasizes centering marginalized perspectives and forms of knowledge often silenced or excluded in scholarly literature (Ackerly et al., 2021). Based on GA surveys and our observational data, we concluded that assembly members (AMs) from the Global South were likely the most disadvantaged participants. This conclusion was drawn because they reported: a) lower proficiency in English, the primary language required for GA events; b) fewer resources and skills to use the technology and tools necessary to participate in GA's online events; and c) greater financial hardships and lower levels of formal education compared to assembly members from the Global North.

Nevertheless, to uphold the GNT principles of comprehensiveness and mitigate bias in our data generation, the research team acknowledged the significant internal diversity within what is commonly referred to as the Global South. To promote internal variability in our sample, we invited 14 non-English-speaking citizens from three continents and six macro-regions of the Global South, ensuring cultural, ethnic, and racial diversity. In terms of sociodemographic markers, our sample included seven female and seven male participants: five were between 16 and 30 years old, four were between 31 and 50 years old, and five were above 51 years old. Four participants reported being in a stable or favorable economic situation. This approach aimed to capture a broader range of experiences and perspectives while addressing potential biases in our research.

Region	Gender (declared)	Age	Occupation / Profession	Economic situation (declared)
Eastern-Asia	F	20y	Undergraduate Student	Good / Stable
Eastern-Asia	F	29y	Marketing	Not good / Difficult
South Asia	M	51-65y	Fisherman	Not good / Difficulties
South Asia	F	30y	Seamstress	Not good / Difficult
West Asia	M	75y	Retired	Good / Stable
West Asia	F	37y	Educational area	Not good / Difficult
West Asia	M	40-50 (estimated)	Engineer	Good / Stable
Central Africa* (Interview conducted in March 2024)	F	60-70 (estimated)	Autonomous Seller	Not good / Difficult
Central Africa	M	30-40 (estimated)	Farmer	Not good / Difficult
East Africa	M	16-18 (estimated)	High-school student	Not good / Difficult
Latin America and the Caribbean	M	20-30 (estimated)	Undergraduate Student	Good / Stable
Latin America and the Caribbean	F	37	Hairdresser	Not good / Difficult
Latin America and the Caribbean	F	60-70 (estimated)	Retired	Not good / Difficult
Latin America and the Caribbean	F	60-70 (estimated)	Cook	Not good / Difficult

Table 12: Descriptive data of interview participants. Source: Author.

To uphold Ground Normative Theory (GNT)'s principle of comprehensiveness (Ackerly et al., 2021) and mitigate biases, as discussed in the introduction of this chapter, we conducted interviews with all members of the Global Assembly's Central Circle and Delivery Team (15 individuals) as well as representatives from all Cluster Facilitator organizations (9 organizations) that supported community hosts and assembly members worldwide. In this thesis, these interviews served as complementary data in two key ways: a) to clarify details and design choices of the GA, and b) to broaden and contrast perspectives on aspects that our interviewees identified as either positive or negative..

Organization	Cluster (Language/Geography)
UDaan	Asia
G1000.nu	Europe-Asia
Shimmer SDG	China
MSU – Iligan	Asia
Community Organisers	Anglophone
Delibera Brasil	Portuguese
SCI UM6P	Francophone
CEE	India
iDeemos	Espanhol

Table 13: List of interviews conducted with GA collaborators. Source: Author.

Organizers and Collaborators	GA Role
Susan Lee	Core Team
Claire Mellier	Core Team
Rich Wilson	Core Team

Flynn Devine	Core Team
Sarah Whitley	Core Team
Jamie Kelsey	Core Team
Jon Stever	Core Team
Bjorn Bedsted	Delivery Team
Johnny Darling	Delivery Team
Jeff Waters	Delivery Team
Oussama	Delivery Team
Eva Sow Ebion	Delivery Team
Brett Hennig	Delivery Team
Bob Watson	Knowledge and Wisdom Committee
Stuart Capstick	Knowledge and Wisdom Committee

Table 14: List of interviews conducted with organizers and the technical team of the GA. Source: Author.

Having selected those who would be interviewed for our research, the next step was to build methodological strategies for conducting the interviews. Two principles of GNT were especially important while we designed our interview methodology: epistemic responsibility and accountability not only to the person but also to their ontological, cultural, and conceptual repertoire (Ackerly et al., 2021, p. 5). In the data generation phase, the main strategy to realize this principle was to make practical arrangements to ensure that our research participants speak using their voices and terms. In this sense, we conducted all interviews with assembly members using their first language, which sometimes entailed commissioning journalists and social science researchers trained in applying in-depth interviewing respondents in precarious contexts. This ensured assembly members could talk about their experiences in their first language and fully express their narratives.

Finally, the specially designed interview guide was the primary tool for generating our data. As we will demonstrate below, this guide aligned particularly well with the two central concepts of this thesis: vital experiences and vulnerabilities, for several reasons. First, when developing the interview guide to explore experiences of disadvantage within the GA, informed by feminist critiques of deliberative forums, we crafted questions that prompted interviewees to reflect not only on how they valued or were impacted by the GA's learning and deliberative engagement but also on the broader effects of being selected for the GA lottery on their daily lives and routines, both during and after these democratic innovations.

Moreover, a core aspect of our interviews, as the structure below will show, was to stimulate participants to consider which experiences were not just important to them but truly remarkable—those that remained vivid in their memories, which, according to Dewey's theory,

is a significant indicator of a potential vital experience. We avoided imposing preconceived concepts or expectations about their participatory experience to achieve this. Instead, we posed questions designed to elicit narratives about events that left lasting impressions and encouraged reflection on the conditions that may have influenced why certain experiences stood out over others—a technique frequently employed in narrative analysis [27] (Dray, 1971, p.167; Polkinghorne 1995, p.5).

In practice, our interview guide consisted of 40 questions, divided into five blocks, designed to provide opportunities for interviewees to reflect on and share how their lives were changed by the Global Assembly (GA) at different stages of their participatory journey. The interviews were conducted online in the participants' native languages and had an average duration of one and a half hours. Their recording was authorized for transcription. Not all interviews were conducted during the same period; we began with pilot interviews to fine-tune our questionnaire based on a preliminary analysis of the collected data. This process helped us identify more sensitive or critical topics that required additional attention. Through this approach, we aimed to foster what GNT describes as "recursivity"—the dynamic interplay between empirical work and normative theorizing (Ackerly et al., 2021). The following section will present additional strategies to enhance recursivity during the interview analysis. Below, I summarize the blocks of questions.

BLOCK OF QUESTIONS	DESCRIPTION
Introduction	**Initial greetings and ethical considerations**, including consent for recording and assurance of anonymity.
1 Biographical Information	**Questions aimed at understanding the participant's life context**, covering occupation, typical daily activities, and economic situation. Inquiry into whether and how the Global Assembly (GA) impacted their everyday life, particularly the timing of sessions relative to their daily activities. Exploration of the participant's perception of the impact of climate emergency on their daily life.
2 Most Memorable Part of the Global Assembly	**Questions designed to capture the most impactful memories from the GA**, including personal experiences and memorable interactions with friends and family related to the Assembly.
3 Preparing for the Global Assembly	**Detailed inquiry into the selection process**, including feelings about being selected, initial doubts or hesitations, and reasons for joining. Questions about the role of community hosts or translators, preparation activities, and the use of technology and informational materials provided by the organizing team.

[27] Beyond event descriptions, narrative analysis in the social sciences allows us to map the construction of cause-and-effect hypotheses that an individual has formed about a sequence of experiences they have lived through or witnessed. This is because, according to theorists of narrative analysis, every "performance" constructed by a narrator presents a set of hypotheses about conditions that were necessary or even sufficient for a given event to occur in a specific way and not in another (Dray, 1971, p.167; Polkinghorne 1995, p.:5).

4 During the Assembly	**Focus on learning experiences related to the climate and ecological emergency**, including memorable learning moments, sources of information, and interactions with experts. **Questions about the use of technology during the Assembly**, covering gadgets, internet connectivity, and technical support. **Inquiry into the dynamics of deliberation**, including moments of disagreement, relationships with fellow participants, and how participants' views were reflected in the Assembly's outputs.
5 After the Assembly	**They were also asked questions regarding the impacts GA had on their lives, lessons from the Assembly that were applied to daily life, and suggestions for future support for disadvantaged participants**.

Table 15: Structure of the interview script. Source: Author.

3.4 Data analysis with a normative-experiential Grounded Theory analysis

3.4.1 Employing a CAQDAS software

Previously, I introduced the corpus of this thesis, which consists of narrative-textual data detailing individuals' experiences in the GA. The experiential Grounded Theory (GT) methodology proposes a systematic technique for comprehensively interpreting and analyzing social experiences. This approach involves reconstructing events and meanings presented by research participants through precise coding and categorization, with the aim of identifying both singular occurrences and recurring patterns in their experiences, as well as the hypotheses they offer to explain the conditions under which these experiences emerged. To operationalize this process, I utilized the Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), MAXQDA.

MAXQDA offers a suite of specialized tools for analyzing a wide range of qualitative data sources, including interview transcripts, research diaries, audio and video recordings, social media content, and photographs (Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2019, p. 2). Among the key features that align with this thesis's objectives are: a) Coding tools for data categorization; b) Text search and automatic coding for efficient retrieval; c) A hierarchical category system for organizing data effectively.

Additionally, the software allows for the use of memos and comments to annotate insights and supports the creation of thematic summaries to consolidate findings on specific topics (ibid., p. 5). MAXQDA further enhances the analytical process through features like variable classification, linking, referencing, and maintaining a logbook, all of which facilitate a nuanced exploration of the GA’s impact on participants. These tools also aid in constructing abductive inferences about the conditions under which transformative experiences and vulnerabilities emerged.

One key feature, co-occurrence analysis, helped identify significant relationships between constructed categories of meanings and experiences. This was crucial for uncovering connections that shaped participants' experiences in the GA, allowing the presentation of grounded propositions regarding the conditions of occurrence—though not intended for statistical correlation or linear causal inference.

Additionally, the crosstabs function enabled an examination of how demographic variables intersected with these experiences, highlighting, for example, the influence of gender and economic background on participants' perceptions of the GA.

By leveraging MAXQDA's capabilities, this analytical approach facilitated the creation of a nuanced narrative that integrates participant experiences into a cohesive theoretical framework, aligning with Charmaz's (2006, p. 63) principles for constructing meaningful "analytic stories" in Grounded Theory research.

3.4.2 Charting interviewees' sociopolitical data

One of the key theoretical expectations of this thesis is that the impact of democratic innovations on citizens' lives is influenced by how the design and demands of these innovations shape and deepen citizen vulnerabilities—referring to their susceptibility to being affected and their capacity to affect others.

Moreover, feminist and intersectional literature suggests that vulnerability varies among individuals and groups due to factors such as bodily conditions, social markers, access to resources, and environmental elements (Cole, 2017). Given this context, it was crucial for this research to examine whether and how interviewees' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics relate to their experiences in the GA.

To address this, the first step involved analyzing each interviewee's sociodemographic data to identify their sociopolitical standpoint—a process informed by Harding's (2004) concept of standpoint theory, which emphasizes the importance of considering individuals' positionality in relation to structures of power and inequality.

MAXQDA facilitated the registration, organization, and comparison of each interview's available sociodemographic and background information. This was achieved by recording, integrating, and comparing standardized responses from questionnaires or interviews into a structured document variable data table, summarizing sociodemographic characteristics per document (Rädiker and Kuckartz, 2020, p.22). MAXQDA enabled target case selection based on specific criteria and facilitated comparative analyses across different individuals and intersections of social markers, enriching the overall qualitative study by linking and producing

(non-statistic) correlational analyses of personal attributes with the experiences coded and categorized in each interview. While these correlations do not possess statistical significance, they were crucial for identifying patterns or exceptions in relationships between certain intersections of sociodemographic variables and types of GA experiences coded in different interviews. One example was the non-statistically significant but no less important correlation identified in our interviews of being a female and facing gender constraints experiences during the GA journey. Further discussion on using this tool will be provided in topic 3.4.3.

Below, I present all the sociodemographic variables considered during the analysis of the interviews.

	Variable	**Description**	**Type of Category**	**Possible Values of Answer**
Sociodemographic Characteristics	Geo Reg	Geographical region of the interviewee	Categorical	List of continents
	Country	Country of residence	Categorical	List of countries
	Female?	Gender of the interviewee (female)	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes
	Estimated Age Group	Age group of the interviewee	Numerical	Numeric age ranges
	Less than 18y or more than 50y?	Is the interviewee younger than 18 or older than 50	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes
	Difficult economic situation?	Is the interviewee in a difficult economic situation	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes
	Formal Ed. Level < High School?	Does the interviewee have less education than a high school diploma	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes
	Profession/Occupation	Current occupation or profession	Categorical	List of professions
	Very few or No previous Knowledge on Climate Change	Does the interviewee have little or no knowledge about climate change	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes
	Very Few or No English Knowledge?	Does the interviewee have little or no knowledge of English	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes
	Tech Skills: Cellphones Only?	Are the interviewee's technical skills limited to the use of cellphones	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes
Characteristics of GA participation	Breakout Time	Time of breakout sessions	Categorical	Time ranges
	Plenary Time	Time of plenary sessions	Categorical	Time ranges
	Displacement to participate?	Did the interviewee travel to participate	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes
	Participated ONLY by cellphones?	Did the interviewee participate only using a cellphone	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes
	Translation at Distance?	Was translation provided at a distance	Binary	0 = No, 1 = Yes

Table 16: Sociodemographic Variables and Interview Data Analysis. Source: Author.

3.4.3 From GA narratives to experiential coding

The initial phase of the GT data analysis entailed a detailed interpretation and coding of the GA interview data. Charmaz (2014, p. 4) defines coding as the process of creating succinct

labels that encapsulate the essence of discursive data (acts, phrases, gestures) in a word or two. This process aims to reduce discursive complexity and enhance the identification, manipulation, and comparability of narrative topics and elements, which can then be categorized in a subsequent phase based on degrees of similarity and difference.

Nevertheless, the coding strategy employed in the experiential GT methodology diverges from traditional qualitative content analysis. Charmaz (2006; 2014) and Morse et al. (2021, pp. 32–33) advocate for a "line-by-line" coding strategy, which moves beyond analyzing the grammatical structure and topics of interviews to identify actions and events narrated by interviewees. This approach aims to "nudge us out of static topics and into enacted processes" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 136). Therefore, the outcome of this initial coding phase is to map singular and similar experiences narrated by the interviewees—that is, the "undergoings and doings" that occurred during or because of the GA, in Dewey's (1980, pp. 35, 44) language.

In practice, one strategy I used to produce the experiential coding, following Charmaz's recommendation, was to identify the actions, events, and processes narrated by GA interviewees, paying close attention to the meanings and values they attributed to these experiences. I then constructed code labels using verbs in the gerund form to retain the experiential, dynamic, and temporal characteristics of what occurred in their lives (Charmaz, 2009, p. 136).

Consider, for instance, the experience narrated by a South Asian female assembly member when asked if the GA was the first political collective action in which she had participated. She confirmed that the GA "was my first opportunity ever" and added: "When I joined and met people for the first time, I couldn't speak at all. I used to be scared and hesitant to talk. What will people say when I talk? Will they laugh or comment on my speech? I was worried about saying something wrong."

To preserve the experiential quality of this significant narrative and identify similar challenges faced by other interviewees, I created the broad experiential code: "Experiencing public speaking anxiety or stage fright." This broader code allowed me to aggregate different types of narratives (and narrators) who encountered similar experiences under a unified umbrella. As the abductive methodology suggests, this approach enabled me to construct grounded theoretical propositions about why such exposure occurred for a specific group of people in particular GA interactions but not in others.

In addition to experiences, the line-by-line analysis of interviews revealed two other types of responses that required distinct codification. The first pertained to the meanings attributed by participants to events, interactions, and individuals with whom they established relationships—or whose relationships were impacted by the GA—such as fellow assembly

members, translators, or family members. The second category encompassed the propositions made by participants to enhance the GA or implement similar democratic innovations in the future, such as creating citizen assemblies in schools.

Whenever possible, while coding experiences, meanings, or propositions for the future, I made a reflective effort to create code labels using terms and concepts employed by the assembly members themselves—a strategy commonly called in-vivo coding. This strategy is crucial for fostering core principles of GNT, such as epistemic accountability, and for developing a critical, experiential GT (Morse et al., 2021, p. 27).

The in-vivo coding played a crucial role in my analysis, particularly when coding narratives in which interviewees described the qualities and characteristics of vulnerabilities they experienced during GA events and interactions. By closely examining the concepts and terms used by participants, for example, it became evident that many interviewees described the deliberative interactions of the GA as a "classroom" rather than a political deliberation. They recurrently referred to their experiences using terms such as "classes" and "trainings", and described experts and facilitators as "teachers."

This sheds light on an unintended consequence of certain design choices within the GA, which inadvertently led participants to experience asymmetric relationships in terms of knowledge exchange, realizing that they were there more to learn than to co-construct knowledge. For instance, consider the narrative of a Central African assembly member (AM):

> “For me, *I knew no one can tell me anything that I could accept whether it was my groupmates or friends*. I only trusted the response and clarity that I will receive from the experts or our group facilitators. *I put so much trust and confidence in our teachers* so I always keep all my questions until in the evening when I will attend the assembly to ask those questions”.

This example highlights how my initial coding strategy leveraged the possibilities of capturing the participants' authentic experiences and also grasped critical insights into the unintended dynamics occurring within the GA.

3.4.4 Focused coding

The experiential GT progresses to a focused coding stage after the initial coding of the meanings and experiences described by the interviewees. The aim of this phase is to refine and enhance the representativeness of the codes by systematically comparing initial definitions and adjusting or combining them as needed. Throughout this phase, memos and diagrams were employed to analyze the relationships between labeled experiences, considering aspects such as completeness, opposition, and consecutiveness (Charmaz, 2014, pp. 57–60). This phase was

also instrumental in advancing the core commitments of GNT, particularly comprehensiveness, and recursivity, through constant questioning and reflection on the interpretations underlying the code labels (Ackerly et al., 2021).

In the GA interview analysis, the focused coding phase was crucial for identifying similar experiences shared by interviewees during or as a result of their GA journey. However, this phase went beyond merely aggregating narratives with common themes. Specifically, I created sub-codes within the broader consolidated experiential categories. These sub-codes helped to distinguish between the conditions of occurrence, sources, and consequences of the lived experiences identified.

Consider, for example, the experiential code "Public speaking anxiety/stage fright" mentioned earlier. While diagramming the sources or conditions leading to "stage fright" as described by assembly members, I observed notable differences in their attributions. For instance, the South Asian assembly member (AM) I referred to earlier linked her "stage fright" to a broader concern about how the audience might react. Conversely, a South American AM attributed his "stage fright" to the specific setting of speaking during plenary sessions, where experts invited by the GA presented to all attendees. He explained: ″For me, for example, when I was in the plenary (...), the only problem was, like, feeling a bit embarrassed to speak in front of so many people because that's where the information from the experts came from.″

The image below, showcasing the hierarchy of codes in the MAXQDA software, illustrates the type of code refinement and sub-coding production I implemented during the focused coding phase.

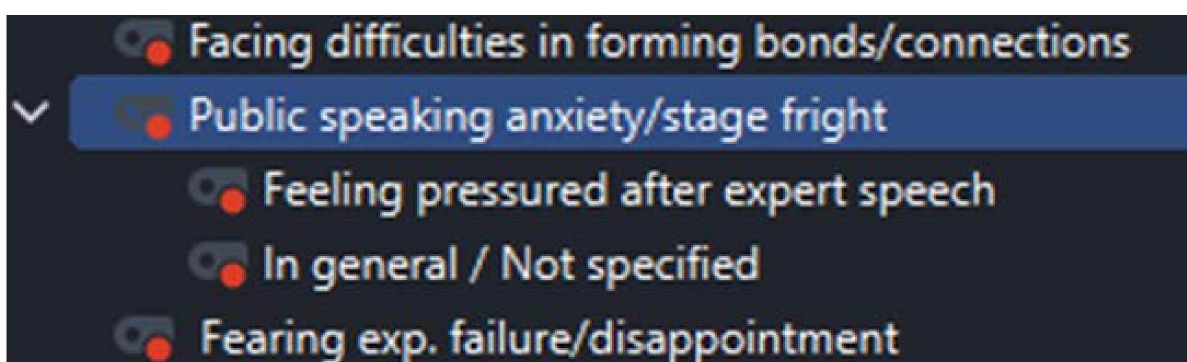

Figure 4: Example of an experiential coding and their conditional sub-codings. Source: Author.

Moreover, this strategy of sub-coding the conditions of occurrence and consequences of the experiences narrated by participants enabled me to consolidate the categorical-experiential diagrams developed during the research. These diagrams served as valuable visual resources for presenting the analytic stories derived from the GT analysis.

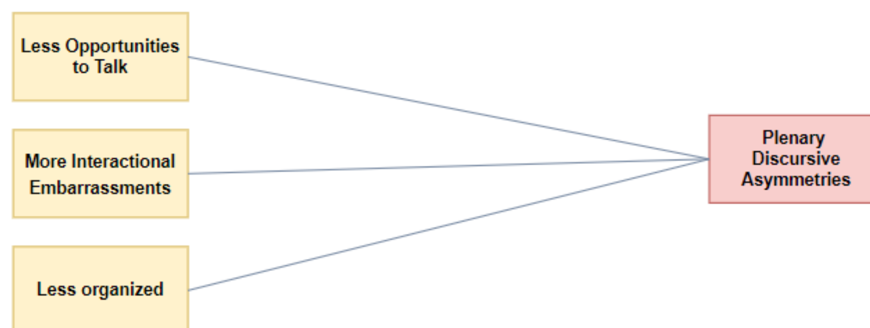

Figure 5:. Example Diagram of Interaction Experience in GA Plenary Sessions and the Coded Asymmetric Disadvantage Source: Author.

3.4.5 From codes to abductive analytical and theoretical categories

After reviewing and consolidating codes that summarize the meanings attributed to GA events and interactions, propositions for future GA editions, and narrated experiences related to the GA, I generated sub-codes to distinguish the sources and conditions of these experiences where possible. Following this, I began categorizing these codes into broader sets with similar characteristics.

Using a bottom-up approach, I first organized the codes into three primary categories: meanings, propositions, and experiential codes. Next, I grouped these categories based on their relevance to specific phases or contexts of the GA. This methodical categorization facilitated a structured analysis of the data according to the different aspects and phases of the GA, a process made easier by the structure of the interview script.

For instance, codes related to the assembly member selection process for the GA were grouped under "GA selection process." Propositional codes suggesting improvements or innovations to GA procedures, such as the sortition method for selecting members, were classified according to the relevant GA phase or stage they addressed. Similarly, experiential codes that captured narratives from deliberative session interactions were placed under "Discussing/deliberating in GA."

0_GA selection process	1_Participating in GA	2_Learning / receiving information in the GA	3_Discussing / deliberating in GA	4_Constructing the Peoples's Declaration	5_Participating at COP-26	6_ After GA
0.1_Meaning/valuing	1.1_Meaning/valuing	2.1_*[28]	3.1_*	4.1_*	5.1_*	6.1_*
0.2_Prop.of improvement	1.2_Prop.of improvement	2.2_*	3.2_*	4.2_*	5.2_*	6.2_*
0.3_Experiences	1.3_Experiences	2.3_*	3.3_*	4.3_*	5.3_*	6.3_*
0.3.1_Vital Exp.	1.3.1 Vital Exp.	2.3.1_*	3.3.1_*	4.3.1_*	5.3.1_*	6.3.1_*
0.3.2_Challenging Exp.	1.3.2 Challenging Exp.	2.3.2_*	3.3.2_*	4.3.2_*	5.3.2_*	6.3.2_*
0.3.3_Response-abilities	1.3.3_ Response-abilities	2.3.3_*	3.3.3_*	4.3.3_*	5.3.3_*	6.3.3_*
0.3.4_Adverse Exp.	1.3.4 Adverse Exp.	2.3.4_*	3.3.4_*	4.3.4_*	5.3.4_*	6.3.4_*

Table 17: Categorization tree of meanings, propositions and GA experiences. Source: Author.

On the other hand, it was not sufficient to categorize the experiential codes summarizing the narratives of interactions experienced during the GA, or those that occurred because of the GA—such as participation at COP-26—into broad categories based solely on GA phases.

Drawing from Dewey's pragmatist philosophy, I considered that the qualities of an organism's experiences—comprising exposures and sequences of interactions with the world—vary according to the effects, consequences, or transformations they induce, such as growth or harm. In this sense, building on the theoretical discussion in Chapter Two, I categorized the experiential codes derived from the analysis and interpretation of the interviews into four types:

- Vital experiences: Indicating positive transformations or growth in interviewees' perceptions and/or ways of establishing relationships with political issues (e.g., climate change), or with themselves, others, or the world.
- Challenging experiences: Involving obstacles and issues arising from GA demands and design choices that were overcome and/or contributed to the emergence of vital experiences.

[28] The sub-categories follow the same nomenclature, despite changes in the numeric prefix.

- Adverse experiences: Referring to situations where an individual's political, emotional, or physical integrity was compromised due to the absence or inefficient provision of participatory resources, support, or care.
- Response-abilities: As discussed with Butler and Athanasiou (2013, pp. 65–66; 107) in Chapter One, these refer to acts of relational resistance and resilience where individuals mitigate challenging or adverse experiences of vulnerability—or even transform them into vital experiences.

Nevertheless, as I will argue in the following chapters, it proved important to distinguish where and/or in whom the practical effects and transformations of these categorized experiences predominantly manifested. For example, one specific situation involves an individual experiencing physical and mental stress as a consequence of the GA's intensive demands. However, a qualitatively distinct experience—though potentially related in terms of impact—might involve someone applying knowledge gained from GA learning sessions to plant trees at their workplace.

Given this perspective, I further categorized each of the four types of experiences mentioned previously, when possible or effective, into two sub-categories based on their primary "impact area": a) Individual organism; b) Relationships with others and/or the material environment. To avoid dichotomous distinctions, I classified experiences under the second category whenever evidence suggested that the impacts affected both the individual and their relationships with others and the environment.

3.4.5 From categories to a theoretical analytic history

According to Charmaz (2006, pp. 103–104), an Experiential Grounded Theory (GT) aims to produce a theory composed of a set of "abductive inferences" that offers a comprehensive interpretation of a sociopolitical phenomenon by describing the relationships between experiential concepts and codes constructed through a progressive analysis of qualitative data. One strategy to maintain the research's experiential character is to present the resulting theorization as an "analytical story" of the sociopolitical process that was abductively interpreted. This can be done by weaving a "narrative" that "specifies conditions" and "forecasts consequences" of the analyzed experiences and processes (ibid., p. 148).

Following these propositions, the analytic story presented in the following chapters of this thesis will interweave relationships between the broader categories I constructed (GA phases and stages) and their subcategories (meanings, propositions, and types of experience).

Nevertheless, beyond merely presenting and describing the types of experiences (vital, challenging, adaptive, adverse) within each GA phase or stage, the analytic story will also introduce abductive hypotheses and interpretations of their conditions of emergence and consequences. Moreover, adhering to the foundational principles of Grounded Normative Theory (GNT), this thesis's analytic story will offer grounded suggestions to empower future transnational democratic innovations. These suggestions will focus on implementing design devices and practices to cultivate more vital experiences and, indirectly, foster more vibrant and creative democracies aligned with John Dewey's democratic hypothesis.

The practical strategies employed to construct this thesis's analytic story followed the sequence below.

a) *The structure of the analytic stories presented as a result of the Grounded Theory analysis*

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 of this thesis present the three main analytic stories that emerged from the analysis, reconstruction, and categorization of lived experiences in the GA, as previously narrated. Each chapter focuses on one of the three processes that, according to the categorical analysis described earlier, had the greatest capacity to aggregate sets of significant lived experiences for the interviewees: (i) transformation of the conditions for political appearance and recognition of citizens in the GA; (ii) learning and reconstruction of perspectives on the climate and environmental crisis; (iii) construction, deliberation, and presentation of the People's Declaration at COP-26.

In each of these results chapters, the analytic stories of these processes are told according to the following structure: (i) an introduction that contextualizes the broader sociopolitical process to be explored; (ii) a presentation of the vital experiences that constituted the broader processes presented, along with their conditions of emergence and consequences; (iii) identification of political vulnerabilities in each of the processes, considering both their conditions of emergence and their concrete impacts, which may have manifested as either participatory disadvantages or even harm to the integrity of the participants; (iv) conclusion of the analytic story, which uses axial concepts to organize and connect the sets of experiences presented with broader social and political theory.

For methodological and political reasons, particularly based on the principles of GNT, I minimized references to academic literature and even to the axial categories of each chapter (e.g., recognition, deliberation) during the presentation of the reconstructed and analyzed vital experiences and political vulnerabilities. This approach prioritizes the abductive interpretations

that arose from the empirical material and the research subjects' voices. Therefore, the theorization and stronger connection of the Grounded Theory results with academic literature and concepts will be briefly addressed in the introduction of each chapter and explored more extensively and comprehensively in the conclusion of each chapter.

b) *Presenting the Vital Experiences and Political Vulnerabilities in each chapter*

Each of the results chapters primarily focuses on presenting a set of vital experiences and political vulnerabilities that, although grouped around the processes in which they predominantly manifested, exhibit cross-cutting connections between them. These experiences are presented in each chapter following the structure and hierarchy of the coding work described in previous sections. For example, one of the political vulnerabilities examined in Chapter 4, which addresses the transformations in the usual conditions of citizens' political appearance and recognition, relates to the "gender constraints" faced by interviewees. Several participants described how domestic tasks imposed significant costs on their ability to participate in the GA, creating a political disadvantage compared to others who did not face similar burdens.

To present categories of vital experiences and political vulnerabilities like the one described above, two descriptive-analytical movements were carried out:

(i) Comparative Narrative: This involved comparing the experiences of participants who faced similar political vulnerabilities, identifying singular or common factors that might explain why these experiences occurred. For example, the analysis considered how the intersection of social markers (such as gender, class, and lifestyle) shaped the emergence of specific vulnerabilities.

(ii) Variation in Consequences: This examined how the consequences of these vulnerabilities—whether as political disadvantages or more severe harms—varied across interviewees. Additionally, it explored whether participants narrated any form of response-ability that helped mitigate these political vulnerabilities. For instance, some interviewees described strategies like redistributing domestic tasks with family members to alleviate the burden and enable their continued participation in the GA.

To facilitate the presentation of these results, diagrams were created to trace the relationships between the examined categories, their conditions of emergence, and their consequences, as shown in the figure 6 below.

But how were the relationships between experiential categories, whether vital experiences or political vulnerabilities, and their distinct and often diverse conditions of emergence, consequences, and response-abilities constructed?

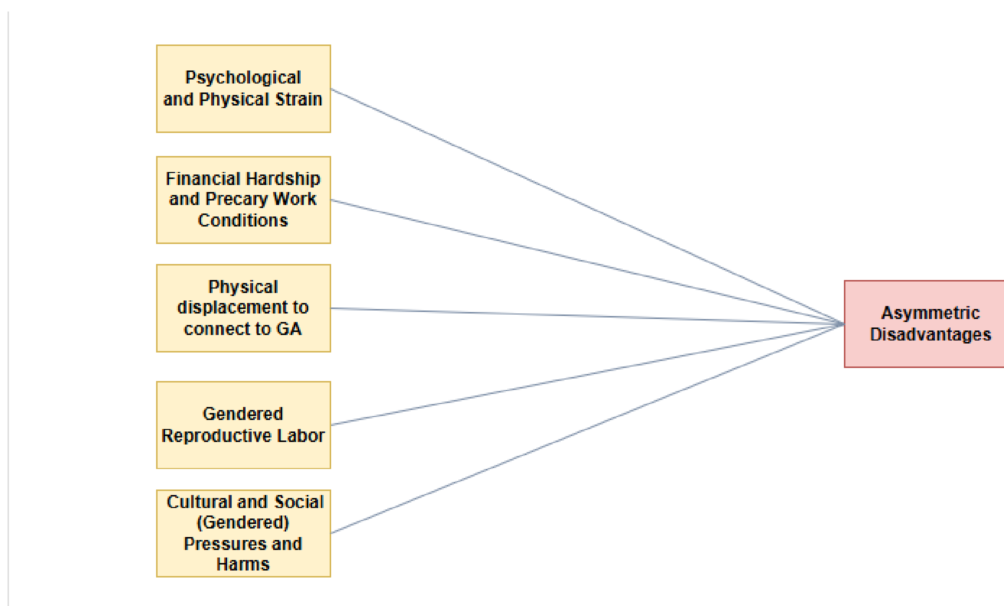

Figure 6: An example of a diagram that relates disadvantages derived from personal and bodily vulnerabilities interacting with conditions of participation in the GA. Source: Author.

Beyond the interpretation of the standpoints that our research subjects presented about the conditions and consequences of the experiences they lived. I also used our CAQDAS software for a *co-occurrence* analysis of my grounded categories, enabling me to detect coded experiences that intersect or overlap within the dataset. The presence of two or more codes and categories *co-occurring in different data segments of different interviews suggests a stronger relationship between them, a correlation without statistical* significance but of qualitative relevance (Kuckartz; Rädiker, 2019, p.142).

Illustrating this qualitative co-occurrence analysis, below is a common pattern observed in my interviews that pointed to a key response-ability of the women participants who faced "gendered constraints" to participate in the GA and that helped mitigate participatory challenges of some of those: the support received from family (coded in purple) when the demands and schedule of the GA interfered with crucial personal activities, such as domestic labor (coded in red).

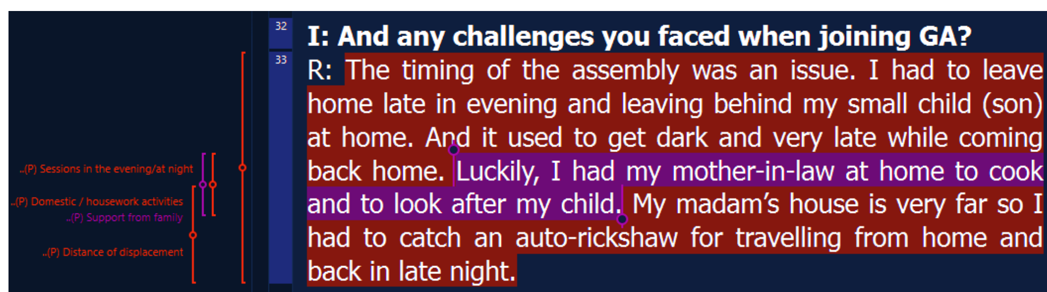

Figure 7: Example of co-occurrence of challenging and response-abilities. Source: Author.

Beyond analyzing co-occurrences to map relationships among experiential codes and categories, the crosstabs function in MAXQDA enabled me to identify connections between the intersection of interviewees' sociodemographic data and the experiential codes and categories developed during the analysis. The crosstabs function generated a table displaying each sociodemographic variable of the interviewees—such as age, gender, education, and economic situation—in columns, with each experiential code or category organized in rows. The software indicates a frequency whenever a co-occurrence between one of these variables and an experiential code or category is identified. These results allowed me to compare, for instance, the frequency at which certain meanings, propositions, and experiences occurred among participants with different economic backgrounds and genders. For example, this tool revealed that female interviewees and those facing economic challenges tended to perceive the GA more as a global dialogue and knowledge exchange platform rather than as a political platform for effecting concrete change in climate and environmental crises.

While not statistically significant, such insights help consolidate or identify patterns and peculiarities in the relationships between specific intersections of social markers and experiences within the GA. This approach advances the critical and embodied sensibility that Patricia Hill Collins (2012) advocates for when applying pragmatic concepts like vital experiences.

	Female? = 1	Difficult economic situation? = 1
1_Participating in GA		
1_Meaning/valuing GA		
Significance of the GA		
Platform for Global Dialogue and Communication	83.3%	85.7%
Knowledge Exchange and Acquisition	66.7%	71.4%
Platform for Action and Change	33.3%	57.1%
International Citizen Representation and Governance	16.7%	
Σ SUM	200.0%	214.3%
# N = Documents/Speakers	6 (46.2%)	7 (53.8%)

Figure 8: Example of a crosstabs consult correlating sociodemographic data (gender and economic situation) with meanings attributed to GA journey. Source: Author.

c) *Connections of the reconstructed and analyzed experiences with broader social and political theory: the use of Theoretical Axial Concepts*

Finally, as previously noted, Charmaz (2006, p.63) contends that an experiential GT aims to construct an "analytic story" that employs "theoretical coding families" to interconnect a theory, demonstrating "how the substantive codes" identified through empirical analysis "may relate to each other as hypotheses to be integrated into a theory" and provide comprehensive meaning to a sociopolitical process (Glaser, 1978, p.72 apud Charmaz, 2006, p.63).

Charmaz (2006, p.76) provides examples of these theoretical coding families, including Barney Glaser's "Six Cs": Causes, Contexts, Contingencies, Consequences, Covariances, and Conditions. Another strategy involves using emergent or existing axial categories to help weave together the sets of experiences and codes— a strategy I will adopt in this thesis.

Upon completing the bottom-up categorical analysis outlined earlier, I identified three sets of political processes that were most responsible for generating the vital experiences, political vulnerabilities, and response-abilities among GA participants; i) Being randomly selected, simply showing up, and connecting with GA events; ii) Perceptions held about the climate crisis and climate change; iii) The various impacts of the construction, deliberation, and presentation of the People's Declaration at COP-26.

In the language of abductive methodology, as articulated by Charles Peirce (1989), the result of abductive research is to chart and reconstruct processes and experiences that require both existing and emergent concepts and theories to be fully understood. The table below presents these broader sets of processes as analytic stories, along with the main axial concepts—beyond addressing vital experiences and vulnerabilities—that helped me make sense of these processes and connect them to broader social and political theory debates.

	Analytic Story	**Main Axial Concepts**
Chapter 4	Transformation of conditions for political appearance and recognition of citizens in the GA	• Political Identity (Bernstein, 2008) • Democratic Appearance (Arendt, 1958) • Democratic Recognition (Honneth, 1995; Mendonça, 2006) • Practical representative (Emergent from research)
Chapter 5	Learning and reconstruction of perspectives on the climate and environmental crisis	• Transformative Learning (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970) • Scenes of politics (Rancière, 2019)
Chapter 6	Construction, deliberation, and presentation of the People's Declaration at COP-26	• Deliberation (Bächtiger et al., 2018) • Empathetic Reflexivity (Emergent from research) • Political Efficacy (Pateman, 1970)

Nevertheless, as previously stated, and following the methodological and critical principles of GNT, the empirical chapters maintain a minimal connection with theoretical concepts and references, giving greater space to the interviewees' voices, reflections, and comparative analysis of their lived experiences within the GA.

3.5 Credibility criteria and limits of this research design

In Sociology and Political Science, a significant body of qualitative and interpretive epistemologies presents compelling arguments for why such research should be evaluated using specific concepts and parameters. Contrary to epistemologies grounded in ideals of neutrality and objectivity, criteria such as validity and generalizability do not apply to qualitative-interpretive methodologies, as the goal is not to measure the proximity of research results to a universal "truth" or law. Instead, other values and ideals guide interpretive qualitative research (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Yanow, 2015; Schwartz-Shea, 2015).

Two overarching values are widely recognized for evaluating qualitative-interpretive research: “philosophical rigor” and “credibility.” While philosophical rigor refers to the extent to which an analysis adheres to a specific epistemology and methodological procedures, credibility concerns the trustworthiness and believability of research results, demonstrated through transparency, critical contrasts, and the inclusion of diverse standpoints and experiences related to the social phenomenon under investigation (Bevir & Rhodes, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

To uphold these general values, I drew on the works of Yanow (2015, p.107) and Schwartz-Shea (2015, pp. 131–135) to identify factors that contribute to producing sound qualitative-interpretive research. These values are explicitly connected to the “core commitments” of GNT (Ackerly, 2021), ensuring that the research maintains both methodological rigor and ethical accountability.

	What?	**How?**
Trustworthiness	Intentionally, systematically and self-consciously address the oblique, partial sight that characterizes all human observation.	Comparative “mapping” of views by a purposive selection of texts, respondents, and/or observational data.
Thick Description	Sufficient descriptive detail of an event, setting, person, or interaction to capture context-specific nuances of meaning.	A nuanced portrait of the cultural layers that inform the researcher’s interpretation of interactions and events
Reflexivity	Implies not simply recording events but thinking about the research engagement in relation to the subjects of his research.	Critical examination and transparence about the research journey, considering how interests, assumptions have influenced the inquiry.

Triangulation/Intertextuality	Multiplication of data sources (s (people, times, places), data generation methods (observation, interviews, documents), researchers, theories and paradigms.	Use of diverse forms of evidence and data analysis.

Table 18: Credibility factors of a qualitative-interpretive research. Source: Yanow (2015, p.107) and Schwartz-Shea (2015, p.131-135).

In this chapter, I have detailed how the aforementioned values were integral to the data generation process and the subsequent analysis of the data corpus for this thesis. The next chapters will further emphasize criteria such as reflexivity and thick description, facilitated by the meticulous composition of the GA journey's analytic narratives. On the other hand, in the context of trustworthiness and triangulation, it is important to acknowledge that while this research did not employ formal intercoder reliability measures, such as Krippendorff's Alpha, the coding process underwent rigorous validation. This validation was carried out in collaboration with three experienced political scientists from the GA evaluation team. Through detailed review and consensus-building, this collaborative effort ensured the accuracy and consistency of the coding database.

As far as I'm concerned, this research encompasses three main limitations. Firstly, on average, the interviews with assembly members were conducted three to four months after the GA events. Despite this, interviewees generally recalled their participatory journey effectively, which reflects the affective power that the GA had in their lives. Nonetheless, some questions, especially those related to their evaluation of the GA's main output, the People's Declaration, elicited more indistinct responses. The challenge in recalling something as significant as the People's Declaration is not viewed as a flaw in this research but rather as an analytical point that raises essential questions needing further exploration.

Secondly, another limitation lies in the fact that some interviews were conducted in languages not mastered by the GA research team. These interviews were carried out by journalists and other supporters on our behalf, which meant they could not be double-checked for accuracy. Consequently, the quality and depth of the interviews varied depending on the interviewer who conducted them.

Thirdly, this thesis cannot make well-supported inferences about the transformative and vulnerable experiences faced by GA participants from the Global North. However, focusing our limited resources on interviewing a broad and heterogeneous sample of participants from the Global South proved to be highly productive. This decision grounded our theoretical proposition regarding the importance of considering the concrete and precarious contexts in which many of these citizens live, the difficulties they face in mobilizing material and temporal

resources for GA participation, and the negative consequences of relying heavily on translators in an English-dominated setting. Nevertheless, it would have been enlightening to examine whether what we identified as vital experiences varied across other social marker intersections among citizens of the Global North. It would have been valuable to explore if the GA profoundly affected how Global North citizens understand and relate to political issues like the climate emergency and, similarly, how they form relationships with themselves, others, and their ways of life in a manner comparable to Global South citizens.

Finally, regarding the use of AI in this thesis, the primary tool employed was Grammarly. Grammarly not only corrected grammatical errors but also assisted in constructing sentences that better fit the formal and academic standards of English. By providing suggestions for clarity, conciseness, and tone, Grammarly played a crucial role in enhancing the overall quality of the written text, ensuring that it met the rigorous demands of academic writing.

4 TRANSFORMING POLITICAL IDENTITIES: DEMOCRATIC APPEARANCE AND RECOGNITION IN THE GLOBAL ASSEMBLY

During the interviews, Global South assembly members were asked why they accepted the invitation to participate in the GA when they first learned of their selection. This question aimed to uncover their initial "impulsion" to embark on this long-term participatory journey, as John Dewey (1980) would describe, and to explore the meaning and value they attributed to this democratic innovation before engaging in its interactional processes. Most responses highlighted the opportunities to learn about and discuss the climate and ecological emergency, contribute to the development of recommendations, and promote collective political action. I will analyze the conditions that shaped this impulsion and the extent to which it was fulfilled in the next chapter.

Unexpectedly, however, the Grounded Theory data analysis revealed that the seemingly trivial processes of being selected in a global lottery and participating in the GA's digital events alongside diverse citizens were, in fact, vital experiences for our interviewees. As I will discuss, one of the main reasons these events held such cognitive and emotional significance for the participants was the way they interrupted and introduced variations not only in their habitual daily lives, as Dewey (1980) would help us explain, but also in their ordinary *political identities* [29] by affording them unprecedented conditions of *political appearance* and *recognition*.

Following the Grounded Theory analysis of the interviews, two "axial concepts[30]" guided the organization and connection of the participant's experiences and analytical stories presented here with broader democratic theory and practice.

Democratic appearance, drawing on Hannah Arendt's (1958) theory, can be defined as an intersubjective phenomenon where a collective of individuals experiment with new identities through processes of "self-creation" and "self-disclosure." This process is considered

[29] Here, I follow Bernstein's (2008, p. 277) consideration in defining political identity not merely as an abstract sense of belonging to a group or relating to a political problem, but as a performance that can be instrumentalized for (i) the "empowerment" of a social struggle, (ii) a "deployment" to change cultural values, and (iii) a "goal" to transform the negative predicates or stigmas currently associated with a subject or group.

[30] As described in the methodological chapter, I employed "axial concepts" to organize and connect various grounded experiential categories and subcategories with broader theoretical discussions of democratic theory. Axial concepts are not predetermined but, but but; they are emergent notions called upon after the initial coding and categorization processes. They serve as the central axis around which related concepts and categories are woven together, facilitating the understanding of how different data elements relate. This approach provides a comprehensive view of the phenomenon being studied, helping to identify core themes and patterns, and ensuring that the resulting theory is grounded in the empirical data, reflecting the complexities of the participants' experiences.

democratic when it fosters a new form of “human togetherness,” contrasting with the ordinary individualistic behavior prevalent in social and economic interactions. For this democratic appearance to occur, "spaces of appearance" must be created—spaces that liberate or at least ease the constraints citizens experience in their daily lives due to material necessities, thereby enabling them to perform a new "quality of speech and action." In the case of the GA, this also encompassed the digital representation of themselves and others, enhancing their sense of presence and participation within a global context (Arendt, 1958, p.179-180; Kruks, 2006, p.477-478).

On the other hand, as evidenced by the research participants, the transformation of their political identities through new conditions of (democratic) appearance changed how they recognized both themselves and others via the GA’s digital interactions. This shift allowed them to experiment with new forms of self-disclosure regarding their political identities, ultimately reshaping their perceptions of self and others.

Drawing on Axel Honneth's (1995) theory, particularly as employed by Mendonça[31] (2009, 2012) in reflections on pragmatism, deliberation, and democracy, I adapted and defined democratic recognition as an interactional achievement facilitated by a democratic innovation that transforms how individuals "fulfill," in Dewey's (1980) terms, their subjective and intersubjective sense of being positively valued for their (i) physical and emotional traits and/or demands, (ii) moral dignity, and (iii) unique contributions to a group or collective. Indicators of democratic recognition include experiences where individuals perceive a positive change in their (i) self-confidence, (ii) self-respect, and (iii) self-esteem. For democracies, such transformations in conditions of recognition are widely regarded as essential assets in empowering struggles for recognition, contributing to the advancement of more democratic laws and the redistribution of socioeconomic resources (e.g., Pateman, 1970; Rawls, 1972; Honneth, 1995)

On the other hand, as the interviewees demonstrated, the shifts in democratic conditions of appearance and recognition facilitated by the GA led to additional consequences, such as: (a) motivating individuals to persist in the GA journey despite the participatory costs and

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[31] According to Maia and Marques (2002, p.63-64) and Mendonça (2009, p.145), in Axel Honneth's theory, intersubjective recognition is constructed through at least three kinds of political dispositives and intersubjective relations: (i) primary relationships of love and friendship, (ii) legal and rights-based relations, and (iii) solidarity. Relations of love and friendship foster self-confidence, enabling individuals, for instance, to express their needs and desires without fear of personal consequences. Legal and rights-based relations grant individuals the status of autonomous and morally responsible agents, facilitating the attainment of self-respect necessary for active participation in everyday or institutional political deliberations. Solidarity promotes mutual sympathy among individuals and self-esteem, which arises from valuing an individual's unique capabilities and facilitates mutual cooperation within and among groups."

demands, and (b) transforming individuals' political identities and their sense of being political representatives for specific social causes—in this case, the climate and ecological emergency. In relation to this transformation, I observed that other citizens not directly involved in the GA began to recognize GA participants as their "practical" political representatives, either because of their involvement in the GA process or their capacity to bring diverse opinions and perspectives to the deliberative table. This phenomenon suggests an unusual form of connection between global democratic innovations and local communities.

Nevertheless, while the design and conditions of digital interaction in the GA were pivotal in altering assembly members' habitual experiences of democratic appearance and recognition, they also interacted asymmetrically with participants' diverse bodily and sociodemographic conditions. This interaction often intensified existing political vulnerabilities or created new forms of participatory disadvantages, revealing the complex dynamics at play within transnational democratic innovations.

John Dewey (1980) argues that resistance and obstacles are crucial for experiences to become significant and vital. Still, some design choices and demands of the GA related to the selection and involvement of assembly members generated environmental, personal, and relational vulnerabilities that led to asymmetrical political disadvantages, sacrifices, and even harm among participants. The intersections of social markers such as age, gender, and financial situation further exacerbated these impacts. Judith Butler (2015) emphasizes the importance of recognizing the unequal and often unfair conditions of appearance under which the more vulnerable attempt to engage politically.

Despite the challenges posed by the GA's design and demands—which sometimes intensified or created new environmental, personal, and relational vulnerabilities—our interviewees demonstrated the capacity to develop and perform response-abilities (Butler and Athanasiou, 2016). In this context, relational resilience involves relying on family and friends to help manage the costs associated with setting aside daily tasks and commitments to participate. Creative action referred to the innovative strategies participants devised to balance and sustain their involvement, often finding new ways to navigate the constraints imposed by their circumstances. These social actions played a pivotal role in helping participants overcome the participatory challenges and disadvantages they faced, enabling them to persist in their democratic journey. As previously discussed, a significant motivator for many participants was the positive transformation in their self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem—changes sparked by their selection and active participation in GA events. These shifts not only empowered them individually but also reinforced their commitment to the collective process,

highlighting how even in the face of vulnerabilities, democratic innovations can foster meaningful personal and political growth.

4.1 Random selection, democratic appearance and recognition

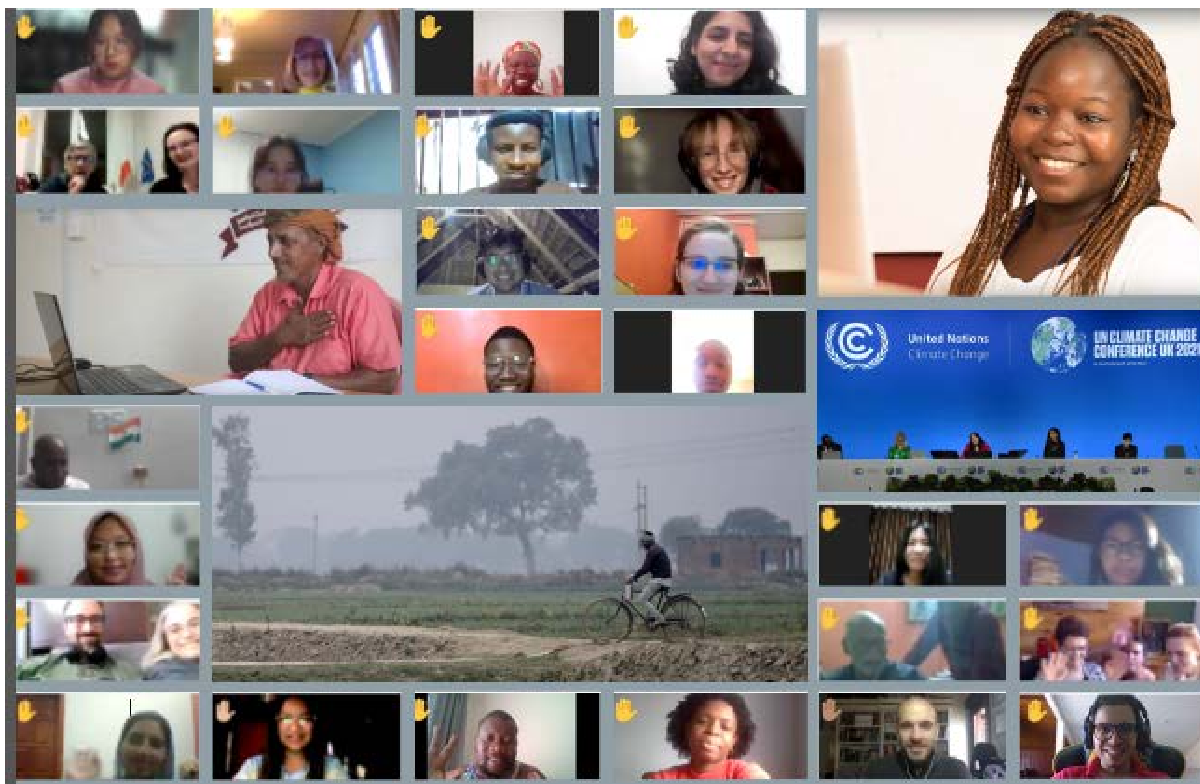

Figure 9: Bricolage of assembly members presented on the cover of the publicly available Global Assembly Report. Source: Global Assembly Team (2022).

Using the lottery in politics, which dates back to ancient Greece, is believed to provide equal opportunities for citizens to engage in politics and prevent conflicts and corruption in public affairs (Buchstein, 2019, p. 367). Contemporary institutions that support deliberative democracy, such as mini-publics and citizens' assemblies, frequently justify part of their democratic legitimacy on the random selection principle but expand upon it (OECD, 2020; Curato et al., 2021). For example, in the well-known case of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly, the application of stratification methods in random selection also ensured equitable and representative participation of citizens by considering geography, gender, and age group (Warren and Pearse, 2008). However, as discussed in the previous chapter, these strategies were further utilized and amplified by the GA.

The GA's random and stratified participant selection can be considered a singular democratic innovation in terms of civic lottery. It began with an algorithm identifying 100 global locations for recruitment, emphasizing geographical diversity. Community organizations within a 200 km radius of each point served as hosts, randomly inviting potential assembly

members. From a pool of 675 candidates, another algorithm selected 100 individuals based on demographic factors such as gender, age, education, and views on climate issues. Ultimately, 98 members completed the process, with two dropping out due to time constraints and misconduct—details not fully covered in the Global Assembly report (Global Assembly Team, 2022a, pp. 70–74). This underscores that while the GA lottery facilitated vital experiences, it did not fully ensure inclusion and parity of participation, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

The use of lotteries for the random selection of citizens is increasingly studied, particularly concerning the limitations of its democratic aspirations (Lafont, 2020). Yet, little has been said about how citizens perceive the experience of being chosen to become assembly members. When considering this question in this thesis, I found that beyond variations in how participants valued the random selection processes, the subjects of our research considered being randomly selected to participate in the GA as an experience that positively transformed their political identities and, consequently, altered other dimensions of their lives.

The cloud of codes below was constructed through a frequency analysis of the meanings our interviewees attributed to the experience of being selected as assembly members. This categorization process led me to recognize the connection between random sortition, political identities, and democratic recognition. In sum, 12 out of our 14 interviewees used more than ten distinct ways to describe the feelings that this event evoked in them. It was through this process of categorization that I realized the relationship between random sortition, political identities, and democratic recognition. I divided these terms into three meaningful groups: a) general positive feelings (green), b) a sense of personal privilege or recognition (purple), and c) a sense of political recognition (orange).

As a result, I concluded that being chosen in the GA lottery was not only remarkable for participants because it aroused positive emotions such as happiness, joy, or delight—considering that emotional significance is an important condition for a vital experience, according to Dewey (1980). Participants also mentioned more complex feelings, such as honor, privilege, grace, and recognition. In the following section, I will explore how these experiences appeared and varied among different assembly members.

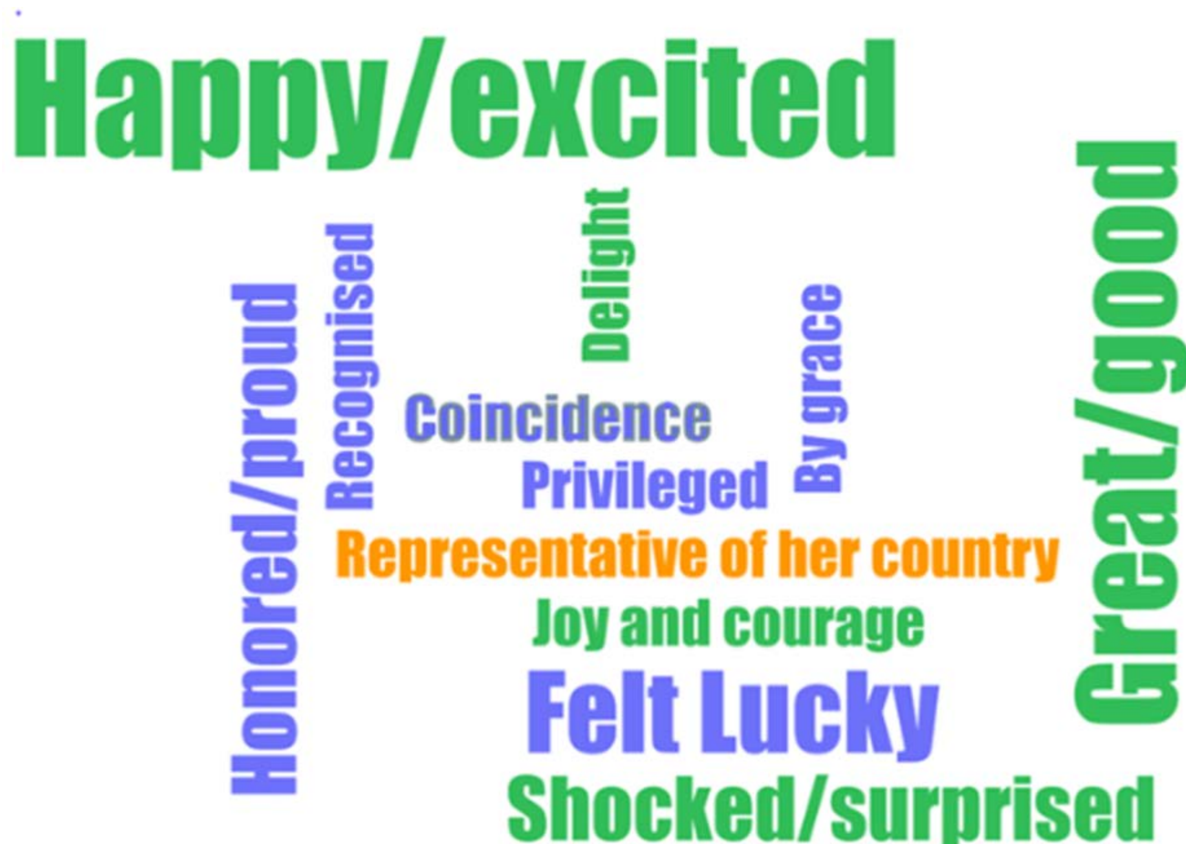

Figure 10: Cloud of meanings attributed to becoming randomly selected for the GA Source: Author.

Chima[32], a farmer from Central Africa, shared that being randomly selected for the GA gave new significance to his relationship with the cosmos: "My story (…) being part of the Global Assembly, I can say it was 'by grace.' I was not the worthiest person, but God helped me by opening doors and causing me to be selected." This sense of "divine" selection not only reshaped Chima's cosmological identity but also bolstered his political self-confidence, which, according to recognition theory, is intrinsically linked to the motivation to express oneself and engage in political participation (Mendonça, 2009, p. 145). This newfound confidence inspired Chima to make significant personal sacrifices, including ceasing his subsistence farming activities to fully dedicate himself to the GA for three months, despite facing immediate existential challenges. As I will explore later, the recognition and status of being an assembly member served as a powerful motivator for Chima, reinforcing the transformative potential of seemingly procedural aspects like random selection.

Other participants similarly experienced shifts in their political identities and existential recognition as a result of being selected for the GA. In Martha's case, for example, the

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[32] As considered in the methodological section, the dissertation employ fictitious names to preserve the identity of the assembly members.

experience of random selection profoundly influenced not only her political identity but also her mental health and personal engagement with environmental activism.

Martha, a participant in her sixties from Latin America, described her selection during the interview as a stroke of "luck" and an invaluable opportunity to "represent her country" in a debate of global significance. However, her community host observed an even more profound transformation in Martha's life.

As a retired woman grappling with financial hardship—particularly the burden of affording her medication—Martha had been struggling to find meaningful projects or a renewed sense of purpose before the GA. According to her community host, being randomly selected for the GA injected a new layer of political and existential meaning into her life. Martha became deeply committed to the GA journey, participating intensively in the 68 hours of deliberative sessions, in addition to dedicating considerable time to studying the learning materials provided by the GA at home. She also maintained active engagement with her community host and translator, both during and between the deliberative sessions. This intensive involvement not only redefined her relationship with political issues such as climate change but also appeared to rejuvenate her sense of personal agency. This was the experiential narrative presented by her community host:

> (…) seeing a person transform, because when Martha arrived, I don't know if she told you, but she was in a moment of depression, a moment that she was more and more indoors. And she came out as the personality of our city, you know, one of the fantastic “women” of 2021 (award). So besides her (...) having learned a lot (..,) we (Global Assembly) were an agent of transformation of life with the assembly. Because now she feels like an environmental activist, she found a way for her to continue, to have the will to live, to get up (Martha’s community host, Latin America assembly member)

Martha's selection and completion of the GA journey, irrespective of her individual performance or the specific outcomes of the GA, significantly transformed how she was recognized both by traditional media in her city and, likely, by her fellow citizens. As confirmed by both her community host and Martha herself, this experience led to her nomination and subsequent victory in a local competition for "Fantastic Woman of the Year," organized by the media. This public recognition extended beyond personal achievement—it altered her political identity, positioning her as a visible figure within her community and providing a platform to share her democratic experiences from the GA. In this sense, Martha became a conduit for the spill-over effects of this democratic innovation, amplifying its impact within the public sphere.

Through her new role, Martha disseminated her newfound understandings and political perspectives on the climate and ecological crisis, actively raising awareness within her community. This process highlights how democratic innovations like the GA can transcend the

confines of formal deliberation, fostering broader civic engagement and public discourse. By the end of her participatory journey, Martha's transformed self-confidence and self-esteem—defined as the appreciation of unique individual capabilities that foster cooperation within and among groups (Mendonça, 2009, p. 145)—had evolved into a new, self-identified role as an environmental activist. This transformation exemplifies how participatory experiences can reconfigure not just political identities but also individuals' broader social roles and contributions. This dynamic will be further explored in the next section, where I examine how assembly members, alongside others in their communities, began identifying former GA participants as their "practical" political representatives on climate and ecological issues. This phenomenon underscores the emergence of informal yet impactful forms of political representation rooted in experiential legitimacy rather than formal electoral mandates.

As the diagram below—and my subsequent analysis—will illustrate, the categorical analysis of the interviews identified several other vital experiences that emerged from the global random selection of participants for the GA. These experiences extended beyond the transformation of political identities, influencing the ways individuals were recognized and how they related to the world around them.

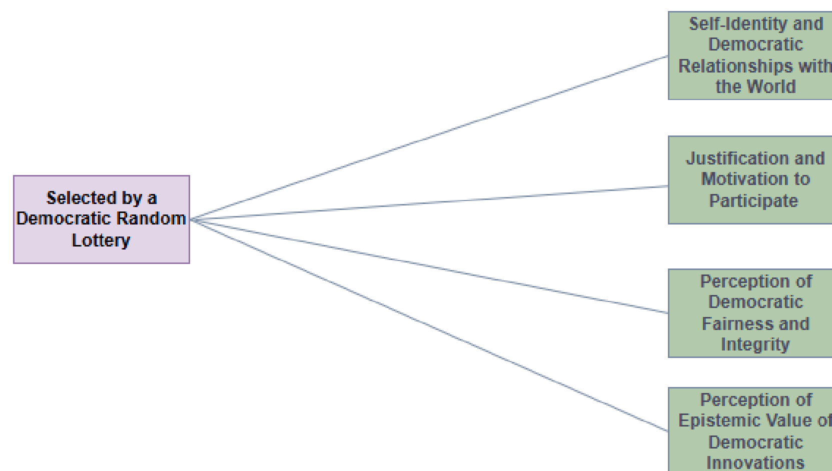

Figure 11: Experiences Fostered by the Event of Being Randomly Selected to the GA. Source: Author.

Let's consider the case of Maria, another participant from Latin America who, like Martha, is over 60 years old. The democratic and ethical values embedded in the GA's random selection process profoundly influenced not only her self-confidence (belief in one's abilities) and self-esteem (a sense of personal worth) but also her political self-respect (recognition of her political equality). Initially, Maria grappled with feelings of inadequacy, believing that her limited formal education was insufficient for contributing meaningfully to debates on the climate and ecological crisis. However, the random selection mechanism itself served as a

powerful counter-narrative to these doubts. By affirming that everyone, regardless of educational background, should be heard and has something valuable to contribute, the GA's sortition process embodied the principle of democratic equality in practice.

For Maria, this realization was transformative. It not only validated her presence within the GA but also reinforced her sense of political worth and equal standing among participants from diverse backgrounds. This recognition went beyond symbolic inclusion—it actively reshaped her self-perception, instilling a sense of legitimacy and belonging within a global democratic forum. As Maria internalized this message, it fueled her motivation to engage fully with the GA process, despite the numerous challenges she encountered during the intensive three-month journey.

In the following sections, I will delve deeper into the specific obstacles Maria faced and how the affirmation of her political equality, rooted in the democratic ethos of random selection, empowered her to persist.

> Because I haven't studied for many years, I'm 62 years old. I stopped studying when I was 16 or 17 years old; I stopped, I just worked. So I often talk to Facilitator there: "Facilitator, help me." (...) And they also said to me that it was not a problem to have or not a lot of study or participate (...) For example, here in my city, they drew lots, only between 6 people, and it was me (who was chosen) (...) But it was great, and I liked it. I was there to learn, right? Then I even said, whenever you want, you can call me, right? (Maria, Latin America Assembly Member).

Not only Maria but at least five other interviewees explicitly recognized the well-substantiated scholarly claim that stratified random selection fosters democratic and ethical qualities essential for both the internal and external legitimacy of democratic innovations (OECD, 2021; Curato et al., 2021). From the standpoint of Carlos, an undergraduate student from Latin America, the random selection process implemented by the GA was a significant political gesture that enhanced the legitimacy of the process and, consequently, his self-respect—defined as the feeling of being equally recognized by norms and institutions as an equal (Mendonça, 2009, p. 145). This democratic quality became particularly salient when Carlos compared his selection as an ordinary citizen to participate in a global political event with what he described as the "everyday politics of clientelism[33]" (Hilgers, 2012), or as he put it, "leverage": "In the end, there was no such thing here. Here we call it leverage, like when somebody helps you." For Carlos, the absence of clientelist dynamics in the GA affirmed the fairness and integrity of the process, reinforcing his belief in its democratic principles. This experience likely influenced his broader political engagement, making him more inclined to

[33] Hilgers (2012), through case studies in Latin America, demonstrates that clientelist relationships occur not only between citizens and state representatives but also among individuals in various positions of power who regulate access to resources and social positions through favors and personal benefits.

support and promote the "democratic method," as Dewey (1939a) suggests, in other areas of his political life.

On the other hand, for participants in less vulnerable sociopolitical situations, while the stratified random selection may not have significantly altered their sense of democratic recognition or fully addressed their accessibility vulnerabilities—a key function of democratic innovations as defined in Chapter 2—it played an important role in demodulating their epistemic vulnerabilities and improving the outcomes of the GA. This was the case for Yuyan, an undergraduate student who described her financial and social situation as stable. For her, the GA's random selection process, beyond its democratic inclusiveness, was instrumental in increasing the diversity of the assembly, which she believed positively impacted its results: "Without the sortition, participants might be selected from similar class, age, and educational background. (...) There was diversity in opinions when we communicated. And it improves the results."

Yuyan's observation underscores the value of diverse perspectives not only in enriching perceptions of legitimacy (c.f. Abdel-Monem, 2010) but also in enhancing the creativity and quality of deliberative outcomes (c.f. Bohman, 2006). However, as I will discuss in Chapter 6, despite the promising potential of random selection to foster diversity, unforeseen challenges and structural obstacles emerged, limiting the realization of this potential in the deliberative processes of the GA. These constraints highlight the complexities of translating procedural inclusivity into substantive democratic outcomes, raising critical questions about the design and implementation of citizen assemblies in diverse sociopolitical contexts.

4.1.1 Democratic appearance and new modes of being politically recognized

Hannah Arendt's (1958, pp. 179–180; Kruks, 2006, p. 477–478) concept of "democratic appearance" emphasizes the importance of creating spaces where individuals can engage in new forms of “self-disclosure” and “human togetherness,” contrasting with the behaviors they typically adopt when constrained by material necessity and dominant cultural roles. Through these processes of transforming their habitual ways of political appearance, citizens gain the opportunity to question and demand new relationships of recognition, either from their interlocutors or through institutional mechanisms like legislation. This can be achieved by presenting themselves in ways that disrupt naturalized assumptions, judgments, or stigmas that negatively label them, or by challenging the hegemonic “partage of the sensible” and “schemes of recognizability” that categorize, constrain, or even harm marginalized voices and bodies (Rancière, 2004; Butler, 2015; Marques and Veloso, 2021).

These theoretical propositions, which served as an a posteriori axial concept to organize the results of this Grounded Theory, were crucial for interpreting and understanding why at least six of our 14 interviewees considered their own and others' digital political appearances on the GA screens to be among the most memorable experiences of their participatory journey. Nevertheless, the interviews did more than exemplify these theoretical claims; they expanded them, revealing the multifaceted effects of political appearances that varied according to sociopolitical characteristics and subjective factors. One of the most significant emergent themes was the experience of realizing they were not merely isolated individuals but part of a broader political collective—or, as Dewey (1946) defines it, a *public*.

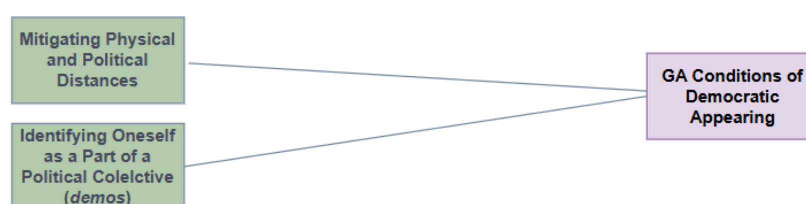

Figure 12: Experiencing Oneself as Part of a Political Collective. Source: Author.

Martha, the assembly member from Latin America whose participation in the GA profoundly impacted her mental health and political identity, shared that her most memorable experience was "each one giving their opinion, everyone talking about climate change." While Chapter 6 will analyze this vital experience more deeply, focusing on the transformative power of democratic deliberation, it is noteworthy that for Martha, beyond discussing climate change, the seemingly trivial fact of "meeting people from all over the world" was equally remarkable. This significance stemmed from her reflection: "I would never have imagined being present," which I interpret as her awe at appearing—being seen and heard—alongside such a diverse group of people, something previously unimaginable in her life.

In a similar vein, Lee, a fisherman in his sixties from Southeast Asia, highlighted the transformative impact of this digital political appearance. He described how the GA provided him with an unprecedented opportunity to connect with individuals beyond his immediate environment, enabling a shift in his self-perception. Through the act of appearing with others in a global space, Lee experienced not just the formation of new relationships but also the emergence of a new political consciousness, recognizing his role within a collective dialogue about the future of the planet. This experience underscores how democratic innovations like the GA can catalyze transformative shifts in political identity, rooted not solely in the content of deliberation but in the very act of appearing together as equals in a shared political space.

> It was nice that people from different nations would ask how I'm doing. Even though we're far apart, we are able to greet each other (…) I was glad because I was lucky enough to be chosen (…) I was glad that *there were so many of us, united in the goal to fight and address climate change. It's nice that people from all over the world were able to unite*. (Lee, South Asia assembly member).

Martha and Lee offer valuable insights into why the appearance of a diverse group of people on their digital screens left such a profound impact. From their perspective, it was not just the novelty of encountering individuals from different parts of the world but the transformative opportunity to establish meaningful relationships with people who were intensely different and distant—individuals they never imagined they would meet or engage within their lifetimes. This social and political distance was mitigated through the shared (digital) political space of appearance provided by the GA, fostering a sense of proximity rooted in collective deliberation. The act of appearing together, despite vast cultural, geographical, and socioeconomic divides, created new conditions for solidarity, as participants embraced common goals and recognized themselves as part of a newly formed collective or *public*, in Deweyan terms. For Priya, a female assembly member from South Asia, the experience was not simply about hearing different voices; it was about *seeing* those voices embodied—witnessing the faces, gestures, and emotions of individuals from across the globe, which imbued their words with an authenticity that other media could never replicate.

> (...) I loved meeting people from other countries too (…) Before, I always watched foreign people only on TV (...) I was always thought how these people look like. Why they are so dark and how weird their hair looks like (…) But, *when I met and saw them personally in the assembly*, I used to get very happy from bottom of my heart. (…). I used to feel proud that I am so lucky to talk to these foreign people whom earlier I had seen them on TV only (Priya, South Asisa assembly member).

For several reasons, the experience of "meeting and seeing" other assembly members "personally" was particularly memorable for many interviewees. But why? One theoretical proposition that helped me interpret why this experience was remarkable was Dewey's (1980) consideration of the power that experiencing variations in the ordinary ways of establishing relationships with others and the world has in us, especially for our specific interviewees. Many of these participants, including fishermen, seamstresses, cooks, and retirees, often lived in precarious financial conditions in small towns. For them, the primary window to the world beyond their immediate environment was through television and smartphones. Thus, they had never anticipated that diverse individuals from different regions and cultures would appear for them and with them, as if they were "united" as a collective who share common fears, vulnerabilities, and desires to transform the world, as Lee described.

This experience was not like watching a documentary on television or scrolling through social media feeds that were directed at an anonymous audience. It was a dialogical appearance that made them feel as though they truly "met and saw them personally," as Priya, the South Asian seamstress, reflected. Direct interaction with a global community underlined the significance of their participation, making it a landmark experience in their lives that profoundly changed their self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem. The grounded theory indicates that they started to recognize themselves as a diverse and united collective that is more than the sum of individuals, connected not only because they were randomly selected together but because they shared a common political identity and goal: a *public*.

But what does it feel like to experience oneself as part of a transnational public that has had the opportunity to interact for as long as the GA space of appearance has existed? As I considered above, feeling like an individual who is part of the public involves not only recognizing a shared political identity with others, formed by being affected by a common political problem and a collective desire to transform this situation, as Dewey (1946) posits, but also experiencing that the digital space where this public could emerge was tangible "there."

Moreover, to some interviewees, this space seemed to transport them to another dimension where physical and sociopolitical distances ceased to matter, democratizing social and physical relationships. Priya and others described this experience, as I presented before, and Daniela from Latin America articulated it well: ″That my name is out there, that I am there, so far away, and that the proposals are really out there, fills me with great pride." In other words, there is a positive feeling associated with virtually and symbolically appearing in a different "there"—a context and role completely distinct from their ordinary lives. This experience allowed them to see their "name" and image in a new light, alongside people they never imagined they would be with, in a space where their perspectives and propositions were genuinely "out there," as Daniela expressed.

Even with my position of privilege regarding access to financial resources and formal education compared to most of the assembly members interviewed, the GA was the first time I appeared and interacted with such a diverse group of people in a political role so distinct from my everyday life. I appeared to those people and to myself not as a student or a researcher but as a citizen assembly notetaker, someone tasked with the important role of recording the questions, reflections, disagreements, and political propositions that this group—whom I never imagined would be part of my life—were building together. My new condition of political appearance made me constantly reflect: did we have the capacity and legitimacy to propose changes to how nations, conglomerates, and other citizens extract resources from nature and

slowly destroy the earth? In that space, we appeared as political subjects who could and should at least try. A new distribution of the sensible reallocated our names, roles, and possibilities, as Rancière (1995) and Daniela considered in that GA digital space. The reason why this all occurred, in my view, can be partly explained by the new forms of democratic recognition we were experiencing in the GA, which was captured in simple terms by Chima from Central Africa: "The worth and value that I was given, considering I was just an ordinary citizen here in Congo (...) made all the difference".

The GA's specific conditions of democratic appearance enabled members to see, be seen, and interact with people globally in a unique way. While physical and political distances existed, they were mitigated as members began to perceive themselves as a heterogeneous yet united political body—an ephemeral public that existed as long as our organisms and digital screens were synchronized. This transformation allowed us to transcend individual differences, fostering global solidarity and collective action, and providing an opportunity to experiment with new individual and political identities.

4.1.1 Who represents this public? Identifying oneself as a political representative

The axial concept of "public," which I appropriated from Dewey's theory, was an important tool for making sense of the experience of forming a collective identity—a phenomenon many interviewees reported having experienced due to the democratic space of appearance that the GA provided. Moreover, the notion of "public" was also crucial for connecting another type of vital experience I identified, related to the transformation of the interviewees' political identities.

According to Dewey (1946), a common way for the public to act, particularly due to the costs of collective action, is through representatives selected by various methods. But did the public formed by the GA also select representatives? As I will address in Chapter Six, there was indeed a selection by vote of participants who appeared at the COP-26 audience to present the People's Declaration to elected or institutional political representatives worldwide. On the other hand, I noticed in the interviews that assembly members also experienced and performed a *political identity as individual representatives* of the GA public they felt part of when they appeared to themselves and others in contexts beyond the GA's digital interactions, despite the GA organizers' clear declaration that "no assembly member is a representative of any place or people; only of themselves" (Global Assembly Team, 2021, p.56).

Figure 13: Experiencing Oneself as a Political Representative. Source: Author.

Some interviewees began to see themselves as political representatives of the GA simply by being selected in the global civic lottery. For Maria, a cook in her 60s from Latin America, being randomly chosen transformed her political status from that of an ordinary citizen to a representative of her country: "And then, when I was chosen, I felt privileged. As a representative of the city, of my country, right?" Lee, a fisherman from Southeast Asia, experienced this transformation more gradually. Initially hesitant, he slowly came to see himself as a GA political representative: "(...) That's how I felt towards the end. In the beginning, I was hesitant. But then I realized I would represent my country."

While Maria and Lee experienced this transformation in their political identities primarily through reflective self-recognition, others began to see themselves as representatives of the GA public because others started to relate to and recognize them in this new role.

In the case of Priya, a 30-year-old seamstress from South Asia, recognizing herself as a representative of her country was not solely due to her random selection as an assembly member. In her situation, the change in her political recognition status was more closely tied to the fact that she was appearing with other individuals whom she recognized as assembly members and who, in turn, recognized her as such. Nevertheless, she also wanted to be seen and recognized differently by her family, as political identities can be used as a collective or individual "goal" to alter stigmas and power relations (Bernstein, 2008, p.277). Her strategy was to record her political appearances with other assembly members at GA events using her cell phone to demonstrate to her family that she now held a new identity she hadn't had before. As she said, this "surprise" political appearance, documented through the recordings, made her parents "impressed and proud of me." However, as we will see later in this chapter, this "claim for recognition," while positively acknowledged by her husband, mother-in-law, and other relatives, was not fully accepted by her brother-in-law, who felt that her role as an assembly member was affecting her traditional gender role and responsibilities within the household.

> When I used to tell my experience to my family members and relatives, *they used to get surprised*. And I told you before, I used to make some videos secretly and show them to my family and friends, that I'm talking to people from different countries such Africa, Australia etc. Initially they never believed that I was doing such meeting, but

> *once they saw the videos they got impressed and proud of me* (Priya, South Asia assembly member).

Priya's experience is particularly insightful in demonstrating how the vital experiences afforded by democratic innovations can transform citizens' political identities and potentially create a spill-over effects, democratizing relationships in other spheres of social life through the actions of former assembly members. In the next section, I will examine experiences that were more successful in producing this effect, particularly when the recognition of these former members as political representatives was not only accepted but sometimes initiated by others outside the assembly.

However, before concluding, it's important to consider another perspective on why someone might attribute to themselves the political identity of a GA political representative. This realization led me to identify another type of phenomenon narrated in the interviews.

Muhammad, an assembly member from a war-torn region in Western Asia, expressed that "Even if people didn't recognize" his political representativeness as a GA member, his personal and political biography—stemming from a country "that is not part of the decision-making class in the climate change field" and living among "those who are affected more by climate change"—was the primary source of his representativity. In practical terms, he felt that he had become a political representative in the GA because he now had a "role and a voice in politics."

Muhammad's case illustrates that the recognition of political representativeness can emerge not solely from external validation but also from an intrinsic sense of responsibility and political agency rooted in one's lived experiences. His narrative highlights how democratic innovations like the GA can serve as catalysts for individuals to claim political identities based on their unique positionalities within global power structures, regardless of whether this role is acknowledged by others. This phenomenon underscores the multifaceted nature of political recognition, where both external validation and self-perception interact to shape how individuals see themselves as political actors in broader democratic processes.

4.1.2 Being publicly recognized as a "practical" political representative

The experiences discussed demonstrate that assembly members tend not to fully align with the perspective of the GA organizers, who state that "no assembly member is a representative of any place or people; only of themselves" (Global Assembly Team, 2021, p.56). In this section, I will explore experiences that show how other political actors, beyond GA organizers and assembly members themselves, also recognized participants as

representatives of their countries or communities in the global climate and ecological crisis debate. Furthermore, I will examine why these experiences were vital for the participants.

Figure 14: Being Public Recognized as a Practical Political Representative. Source: Author.

Amina, an assembly member originally from a conflict zone in Western Asia, works directly with NGOs on climate-related political issues. Although she no longer resides in her country of origin, the pioneering spirit of participating in the world's first GA was deeply meaningful to her: "I am very happy to be among the first people to participate in such an initiative. It has a different flavor to be among the first because you are more motivated," she noted. However, one of the most vital experiences the GA produced in her life was helping her assume the role of a political representative of her country—at least in the eyes of some of her compatriots who attended an English course with her in the country where she now resides.

During the GA, Amina discussed the climate and ecological emergency with her classmates, sharing her experiences as a GA participant. She recalled, "They were surprised that people from our country were being represented (by her) in something after being marginalized for so long." In response to their reactions, Amina committed to bringing their opinions to the GA debates, thus becoming, in my perspective, a "practical representative" of their views: "They were very happy. They believed that it might be possible. We have been very marginalized lately to an unbelievable extent," she noted.

At least seven of our 14 interviewees reported experiences where individuals beyond themselves or those directly involved in the GA—such as family, friends, and other citizens—recognized them as their "practical" political representatives in a global citizen debate on the climate and ecological emergency. This concept of "practical political representatives" emerged during the GT analysis. Practical political representatives are non-elected individuals who, through their engagement in democratic spaces where they are recognized as valuable political contributors, become acknowledged by others not involved in the democratic innovations as points of connection to discussions from which they were otherwise excluded. Through this process, these individuals gain recognition from their peers as not official but "practical" representatives.

Three other assembly members also demonstrated how this process occurred on a broader scale.

One case involved Lee, a fisherman from Southeast Asia, who, thanks to his community hosts, was interviewed by a local media platform. He expressed “pride” in this opportunity, noting that he “was able to serve as an inspiration” to his fellow citizens, though he did not provide further details about this experience. Another case concerned young Kemba, an assembly member under 20 years old from a region in East Africa, who was featured on local radio and television. Unfortunately, the interviews did not reveal more about Kemba’s experience.

The case with the most detailed information is that of Martha from Latin America. Before being selected for the GA, Martha struggled to find new projects and directions in her life. According to her community host, her participation in the GA led to her being featured on a program highlighting the “Fantastic Women” of her region and meeting with the mayor of her city. When asked what prompted these invitations, Martha emphasized that her recognition was not solely due to the knowledge she gained or the quality of the deliberations—though both were significant. Instead, her broad political recognition stemmed largely from the fact that she appeared and participated in an international political assembly discussing a globally relevant topic, which aligned with the local media’s and government’s agenda: “Yes, for sure; if it weren’t for the assembly, I would be just one more, right?”

These cases highlight how the GA served as more than just a space for deliberation. For many participants, it became a platform that not only transformed their political identities but also provided them with new avenues for recognition, influence, and engagement beyond the assembly itself.

Another story that illustrates how becoming a practical representative simply by participating in a democratic innovation can, even on a small scale, impact the electoral behavior of other citizens was shared by Nala, a street vendor from Central Africa. During the interview, Nala recounted that, in the days leading up to her city's municipal elections, when her customers would discuss their voting intentions, she identified herself as one of the global representatives of the GA on climate and ecological change. To substantiate this identity, she used informational materials provided by the GA. Once her interlocutors accepted this identity performance—an effort to “empower” a collective social struggle (Bernstein, 2008, p.277)—Nala engaged them in conversations to help identify which candidates had more environmentally sensitive and thoughtful proposals. According to Nala, the candidate she believed was best for the environment ultimately won the election.

What factors contributed to some assembly members experiencing expanded public and political recognition in their communities while others did not? Interviews with community hosts, cluster facilitators, and GA organizers revealed a near consensus on this matter. However, more evidence and different methodological approaches would be needed to establish a causal relationship. While the GA team encouraged participation and provided valuable resources, such as publicity and media kits, the actions of community hosts—their social capital, networks, and ability to connect with local media and politicians—ultimately played a decisive role in amplifying participants' recognition. As we will examine next, although these community hosts were crucial in enabling assembly members to connect, engage, and be positively transformed by the GA through their support, assembly members also faced various challenges in experiencing transformative outcomes. Notably, some of these challenges were linked to their reliance on the individual characteristics, resources, and capacities of those providing support.

To conclude, it is also important to consider other ways in which the GA promoted broader political recognition of its participants through its design. One significant method was the digital participation of four assembly members at COP-26, where they presented the main outcome of the GA: the People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth. We will discuss in more detail how these representatives were selected during the deliberative events. Another notable method involved the production of eight "short documentaries," each approximately 10 minutes long, featuring assembly members from around the world. These documentaries, published on the Global Assembly's YouTube channel, garnered between 100 and 1,200 views. They provided insights into the daily lives of assembly members and shared their perspectives on the political process they experienced. Additionally, there are plans to produce a full-length documentary about the GA. If realized, this project could represent an unprecedented opportunity for the global publicity and recognition of democratic innovations and their participants.

4.2 Challenges, disadvantages, and response-abilities[34]: appearing and becoming recognized through the GA

As the transformative experiences detailed above have shown, being randomly selected from the world population to engage and appear digitally in GA events significantly altered how assembly members and others were democratically recognized. On the one hand, without

[34] As I discussed in Chapter One with Butler and Athanasiou (2013, p.107), I defined response-abilities as relational acts of resistance and resilience where the subjects mitigate challenging or adverse experiences of vulnerabilities or even modulate those into vital experiences.

the valuable and innovative resources that the GA provided—such as financial compensation, technology, community hosts, and translators—appearing and participating digitally in the GA's events for over 68 hours across three months would have been very difficult. However, our research revealed that even with these resources, the interaction between the demands and design of the GA and its participants' life conditions and characteristics not only intensified existing vulnerabilities but also contributed to the emergence of new ones. These vulnerabilities led participants to incur costs and face situations of participatory disadvantage that even threatened their personal integrity.

In the next section, I will analyze the participatory vulnerabilities that impacted our interviewees' opportunities to appear politically in the GA and experience the positive transformations discussed in this and other chapters. As Judith Butler (2015) argues, considering the conditions under which political subjects appear is essential to understanding when and why their right to assembly is interrupted. It also helps map how they adapt, resist, and present creative forms of participatory improvisation that can inspire other democratic innovations.

The grounded methodology I employed allowed me to classify these experiences of vulnerability into three distinct, though inevitably overlapping, categories in which they manifested, as the following table illustrates.

Vulnerabilities to appearing at the GA	**Definition**	**Observations**
Environmental and contextual factors	Encompasses vulnerabilities arising from participant's living environments, territories or broader socio-political context.	These include characteristics of housing or urban infrastructure issues, situational disruptions like power outages or internet issues, and larger contextual influences such as political instability or climate-related challenges.
Personal and bodily conditions	Subsume both the daily routines and commitments and the physical and emotional states of the participants, which significantly influenced the conditions of participation.	Aspects like age, gender, health status, physical ability, economic situation, and personal or professional commitments.
Resource accessibility	Captures vulnerabilities related to the accessibility and utilization of essential resources, material, symbolic, and informational, during the GA.	This includes issues relating to organizers' performance, community hosts, and translators.

Table 19: Disadvantages in the political appearance of the GA participants. Source: Author.

Before delving into these experiences, it is important to address a variation in the conditions of appearing and participating in the GA that permeated many of them and should be presented beforehand.

The demographic criteria that guided the stratified random sortition of assembly members worldwide presumably selected participants living in various precarious situations. Consequently, not all participants possessed the ideal resources or skills to connect to the GA sessions digitally. The GA proposed a general strategy for those unable to connect independently: community hosts would accommodate assembly members at their facilities, providing computers, internet access, translation, and any other necessary resources throughout their participatory journey. However, as we will explore, the interaction of this strategy with environmental, personal, and resource accessibility factors led to significant variations in how effectively it was implemented and, in some cases, induced new vulnerabilities for certain participants.

4.2.1 Environmental factors

The first category resulting from our grounded theory analysis encompassed experiences of vulnerability that primarily stemmed from an interplay between the demands of the GA's design and the concrete environments in which participants connected to the GA. Among our 14 interviewees, three broad environmental factors were identified as relevant: the COVID-19 pandemic, sociopolitical contexts, and—most frequently mentioned in our interviews—precarious housing conditions. Our analysis showed that the consequences of these factors, as well as the participants' ability to address them, varied based on intersections of age, gender, and other social markers.

Covid-19

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

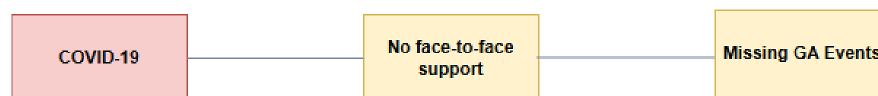

Figure 15: Disadvantages derived from COVID-19 infections. Source: Author.

Lee, a fisherman in his sixties from Southeast Asia, shared the impact of COVID-19 on his ability to participate in GA events. Initially, he was anxious about international travel, uncertain whether the selected GA participants would physically attend COP-26 in Glasgow: “I was a little scared at first because of the threat of COVID-19. I left it up to God to decide if He would send me there.” He understood that the GA was held on a digital platform due to COVID-19, which was not ideal for him: “It would have been better if we were all together physically. However, because of COVID-19, that was not possible.” On the other hand, he recognized that the support provided by his community host played a pivotal role in nurturing his confidence and motivation to engage in the GA despite the pandemic’s impacts: "They said they would help me learn the things I didn’t know. They also said I could speak [participant’s language], and they would translate for me. That’s why I took on the challenge.”

However, for our two other respondents from Latin America, Martha and Maria, both over 60, COVID-19 had a more significant impact on their ability to participate in GA events than it did for Lee. The key difference was that Martha and Maria had to leave their homes to receive face-to-face support to connect to GA events, while Lee could participate from home, using his computer, and receive translation remotely from his community host.

In Martha’s case, a potential coronavirus infection prevented her from joining regular sessions. She couldn’t participate remotely from home because she was entirely dependent on her community host to access the technology needed to connect to online calls. Due to the suspected infection, she was unable to travel to the support location. Similarly, a COVID-19 infection impeded Maria’s participation because her translator fell sick. "It was useless if it were just me going, right? They wouldn't understand me. [The translator] is the one who can speak (laughs)."

From Maria’s perspective, missing that specific deliberative session had multiple consequences beyond affecting her learning journey and excluding her from that decision-making stage. The opportunity to appear and engage politically also creates space to establish emotional connections with fellow citizens and potentially lay the groundwork for future

political or personal projects: "It wasn't better because, as I told you, I couldn't contact anyone. But that was because, on the last day, on Saturday, I didn't participate. Because she got sick, the [translator], from COVID. So I couldn't participate. And it ended, the last day (…). And if I went alone, it would be useless."

As we can see, the measures in place to mitigate the impact of COVID-19 were insufficient for some participants. The pandemic had unexpected consequences on participation, jeopardizing not only their opportunities to transform their habitual conditions of democratic recognition but also their physical well-being (due to susceptibility to infection), access to and autonomy in using technology, and their reliance on translators and community hosts—a crucial factor when considering the mitigation or exacerbation of participatory vulnerabilities in the GA context. Considering the literature on digital accessibility (c.f. Mubarak and Suomi, 2022), it is no coincidence that the elderly participants of the GA were the most dependent on face-to-face technological support and thus more affected by these circumstances—something that could have been anticipated.

Broad sociopolitical context

The Central African interviewee Chima, a subsistence farmer, faced heightened accessibility vulnerabilities, as defined in the literature review on democratic innovations in Chapter 2, due to the interaction between the design of the Global Assembly and the context of war and insecurity in his region. His case is particularly interesting because, although there is discussion about deliberative democracies in deeply culturally and politically divided contexts (cf. O'Flynn, 2006; Drake and McCulloch, 2011) or as a response to climate-related tragic events and crises (Curato, 2019), I am not aware of debates on deliberative participation in the context of an active war.

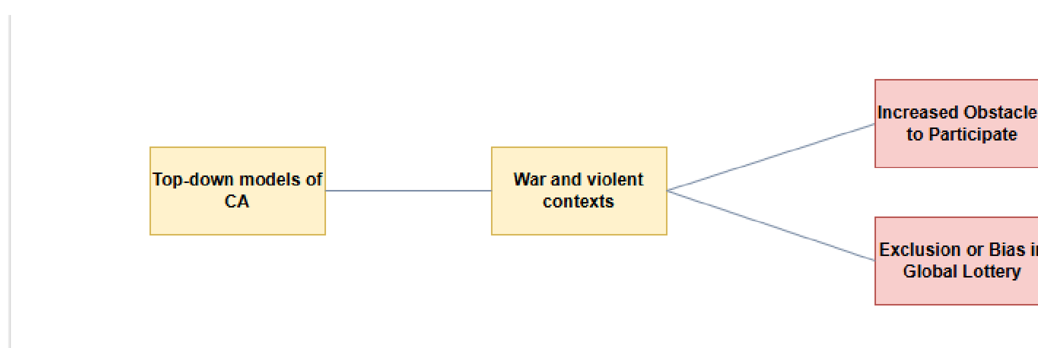

Figure 16: Disadvantages derived from the interaction of GA design and sociopolitical context. Source: Author.

Like Martha, Maria, and many others, Chima depended entirely on the technological and linguistic resources provided to mitigate the GA's design demands. However, providing transportation for Chima to travel from his home to the community host's location was not feasible due to "the ongoing history of war in our country, and, where I live, there is an insecurity problem, and most of the time we do not walk at night past a certain time." In this context, an alternative solution was necessary.

To mitigate his accessibility vulnerabilities, Chima co-created a response-ability with his community host and translator, which was not part of the original GA plan. The strategy involved bringing the technological resources from the community host's location to Chima's home. This improvisation was feasible because Chima's translator had access to a motorcycle, allowing him to travel to Chima's house. However, since deliberative sessions often ended late, Chima and his translator agreed that the translator would stay overnight and return in the morning when it was safer to travel, even with a vehicle. Thankfully, despite the costs and challenges of this adaptation, no harm was experienced.

Sociopolitical factors, like those mentioned above, highlight the necessity of carefully considering the implementation of a European model of democratic innovation in other regions without accounting for the specificity of local sociopolitical contexts—a particularly crucial discussion for those focused on decolonizing deliberative democracy (cf. Curato, 2019; Banerjee, 2022; Drake, 2023). When examining how violent contexts can impact deliberative democracy, I also identified situations where the sociopolitical environment made it impossible for citizens to participate in the global lottery for assembly members. For instance, a community host from Latin America shared that she didn't feel safe approaching random people on the street to participate in the GA due to the sense of insecurity this gesture would create within her organization and for herself.

> There is another problem, the initial idea was to find people you don't know, I mean, like people in the streets or something, but I said "no, in my continent we can't do it, do it, I don't go to the street and say, 'look, you wanna work for this?', first for security, you won't (…) it is dangerous for the organization, you never know if someone is a criminal or whatever, so you have to find people who are in life, like sister of whatever, or the father of the person who help you in your house, never from the streets. (…) maybe in Europe you can do it, but here, no (Latin America community host).

Whether due to a context of violence or other environmental factors, the fact remains that from the interviews we conducted with assembly members from the Global South, we found that at least half—beyond just those from Latin America—were not randomly recruited on the streets but were personally appointed by the community hosts. In more orthodox

definitions of a democratic citizens' assembly, where fair, equitable, and effective random sortition are core defining factors (Curato et al., 2021), this situation could be seen as a significant challenge to realizing the ideals of democratic inclusivity.

Precarious infrastructure

The most prevalent contextual factors that modulated the accessibility vulnerabilities of Global Assembly participants into concrete participatory disadvantages were primarily linked to unaddressed precarious housing conditions, digital connectivity, and the overall infrastructure of the assembly members' locations. Our analysis revealed that those living in the most precarious situations were, as the academic literature on digital participation also suggests (e.g., Moyo, 2009; Grover, 2023), and as we hypothesized when defining the criteria for interviews, the ones who experienced the greatest disadvantages in participating in this global digital democratic innovation. But how was this experienced, what factors were most relevant, and what kinds of response-abilities emerged?

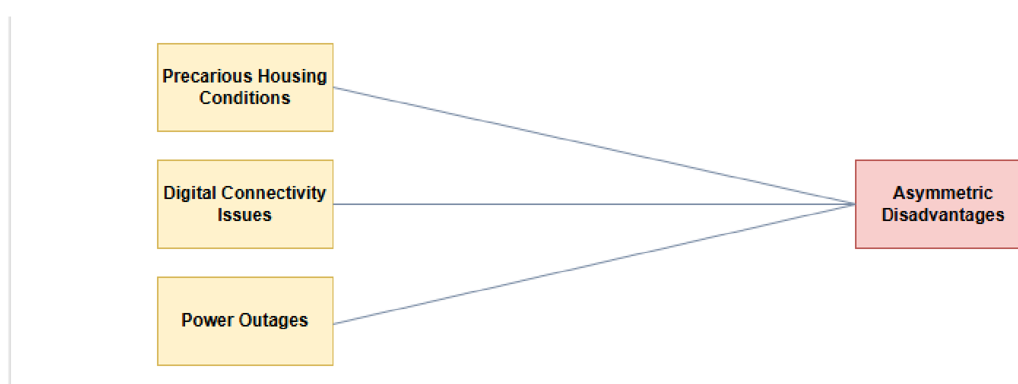

Figure 17: Disadvantages derived from precarious context. Source: Author.

Among our 14 interviewees, eight acknowledged grappling with internet connection issues during the Global Assembly, while five encountered disruptions due to power outages. These problems were most pronounced among participants unfamiliar with the English language or the topic of climate emergencies, further compounding the challenges to their full participation in the process. As the earlier-referenced Central African participant, Chima, underscored, issues with the internet and electricity "caused me not to follow up directly with the teachings and discussions during the evening sessions."

These challenges were partially alleviated through the response-abilities of assembly members. Despite having the necessary resources to participate in the GA from his home, Lee, the fisherman, needed to acquire a power generator due to energy shortages in his region. Daniella, a hairdresser from Latin America with fewer financial resources, who also

participated from her home due to internet connectivity problems, had to frequently go to her neighbor's house to connect to the GA. Her situation confirms our theoretical expectation: the more difficult the economic and housing situation of the assembly members, the harder it was for them to improvise solutions on their own to be able to join the deliberation..

Nevertheless, the improvisations mentioned above—such as those by Chima's translator and the challenges of accessing energy and the internet—prompt a critical inquiry: Is it fair to impose the additional burdens of a lengthy and intricate participatory journey, whether foreseen or unforeseen, on assembly members? This issue is further underscored by Jin, a 29-year-old interviewee from Eastern Asia, who, despite not facing significant environmental or resource challenges to connect to the GA, questioned whether the organizers should have done more to mitigate these structural barriers. Reflecting on a particularly precarious appearance of a fellow assembly member, Jin remarked:

> I think the organizers can help them to achieve equality. For example, once, I saw a participant who attended our meeting outside, and the wind was strong. The picture was different from other participant's pictures on the screen. I felt a little sad. Maybe their living condition was just like that, maybe because the weather there was hot, but I felt that our condition was better, and I felt sympathy for them. So I think it will be good if the organizers can provide them with a better space to attend the meeting. But I know it also depends on specific conditions in each of the countries (Jin, Eastern Asia assembly member).

Jin's perspective suggests that the external conditions of political participation significantly interfere with citizens' ability to appear and engage, even in digital deliberative events. In this sense, despite efforts, digital participatory democratic innovations remain embedded in the physical world, where precarity can affect the conditions under which assembly members appear and their opportunities to be adequately democratically recognized within the GA. This includes impacts on their self-respect when they perceive that they are not participating on equal footing with others.

Furthermore, beyond the broader sociopolitical context in which a digital citizens' assembly takes place, the intersecting personal and bodily social markers of assembly members can interact with the demands of democratic innovations in ways that amplify their participatory vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities can lead to significant disadvantages and obstacles in their ability to join and sustain participation over time, as we will explore next.

4.2.2 Personal and embodied conditions of participation

Feminist theorists like Young (2001, p. 679) have long debated how systemic conditions of social inequality often result in those with fewer resources—both material and symbolic—

facing greater disadvantages or even exclusion from participatory events. Unsurprisingly, it is common practice in citizens' assemblies worldwide, including the GA, to provide various resources, such as financial support, to mitigate these challenges. Nevertheless, what became evident from analyzing the interviewees' experiences is that beyond deliberative disadvantages, there is also significant physical and symbolic effort—and even exhaustion—that needs to be considered in high-demand democratic innovations requiring extensive time and engagement, like the GA. Beyond environmental factors, we have even more reasons to consider that "entering" a democratic space of appearance, even in a digital format, can be a political struggle (Butler, 2015).

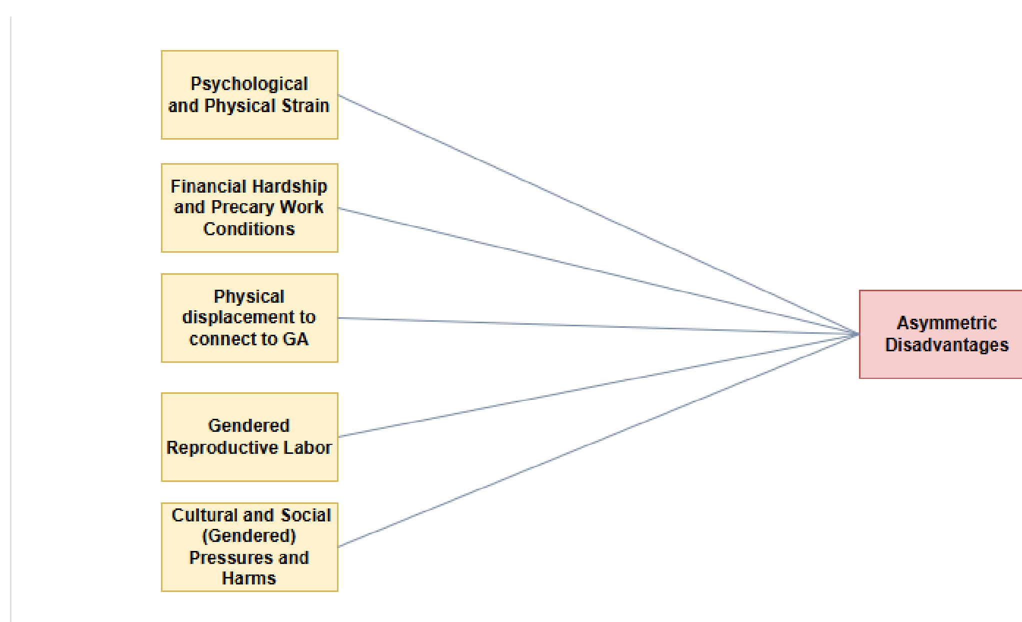

Figure 18: Disadvantages derived from perspmal and bodily conditions of participation. Source: Author.

Over half of the interviewees noted that the GA's schedule and demands impacted their rest or leisure time. While these intrusions could lead to long-term fatigue and diminished quality of life, the complaints were relatively minor. On the other hand, many interviewees expressed anxiety about attending the Assembly, often stemming from feelings of unpreparedness, inadequacy in meeting its demands, or a sense of economic and political disadvantage compared to other participants. Martha, the Latin American woman who became recognized as the "Fantastic Woman" in her city due to her participation in the GA, explained how her political self-confidence and self-esteem were sometimes shaken when she compared herself with other assembly members: "Because I studied little, I didn't even complete the elementary (...) Then, I was very apprehensive about the questions they would ask me and if they would have people of a higher class, as they did."

Experiences of vulnerability like Martha's, which I will discuss further in a chapter dedicated to the deliberative experiences of the assembly members, confirm that participants' personal and bodily conditions inevitably interacted with the GA's design and interactional events. However, when considering solely the capacity to participate in GA events, the analysis revealed that the most substantial impacts were those the GA's demands and schedule had on participants' subsistence and reproductive activities. Women in economically challenging situations were particularly vulnerable, highlighting an important aspect of intersectionality when reflecting on the conditions of political appearance in the GA.

Consider the experience of Yuyan, a 20-year-old undergraduate student from Eastern Asia, who described her financial situation as "more than sufficient" and noted her access to technological and linguistic resources, often not requiring assistance from her translator. However, as time is a finite resource for any individual (Elliot, 2023), her participation in the Global Assembly inevitably impacted her daily activities as a student and a political party member. Nonetheless, given her socioeconomic advantages, minor adjustments were sufficient to ensure her participation in the GA: "I was a probationary party member at that time, attending party lectures and also busy with the duties of the student union. As a result, sometimes, I needed to adjust schedules to avoid conflicts."

On the other hand, Maria, one of our senior interviewees from Latin America, faced vulnerabilities that required more intensive adaptations for her participation in the GA. These experiences reveal how neoliberalism and the related conditions of being part of the "precariat[35]" not only significantly increased her cost of political participation but also demanded a considerable amount of her physical energy and resilience.

Deeply affected by financial hardship exacerbated by the pandemic, Maria described her financial condition as a "struggle. Working to eat." Nonetheless, when invited to participate in the Global Assembly, she felt joyful, fueled by her desire to learn more about climate change. Yet, her evening engagement in the Global Assembly significantly disrupted her subsistence activities. Due to economic hardship, Maria needed to work in a restaurant kitchen during late evenings and nights and supplement her income as a hairdresser in her free time.

For Maria, the challenges of participating in the digital interactions of the GA involved shouldering additional responsibilities and managing an already full schedule. Her response

[35] "Precariat 'is not just a matter of having insecure employment, of being in jobs of limited duration and with minimal labour protection (…) it is being in a status that offers no sense of career, no sense of secure occupational identity and few, if any, entitlements to the state and enterprise benefits that several generations of those who found themselves as belonging to the industrial proletariat or the salariat had come to expect as their due' (Standing 2011, 24).

was to negotiate a temporary leave with her restaurant employers, leaving work for a few hours in the evening and then returning at night to complete her shift—an ambiguous possibility afforded by her “flexible” position in part-time precarious work. Recognizing that her desire to learn and participate would not persuade her employers to acknowledge the political importance of her involvement, she framed her request using an economic argument. She highlighted that her participation would be financially compensated, which would help fund much-needed repairs at home: "I told them. I said that I would be participating and that I would receive monetary compensation. Then they said, ‘Go, go.’ (...) And this compensation was very good for me, right, because I'm building, building a house gate."

Despite her employers’ recognition of her participation in economic terms and the resources provided by the GA, Maria had to endure prolonged physical stress to sustain her involvement in the GA over three months. Since she also needed to travel to a location assigned by her community host to connect to the GA, the commute and the urgency to return to her night shifts required her to take "mototaxi" rides, a mode of transportation not officially regulated in her city at the time, exposing her to additional physical and legal vulnerabilities. Moreover, her routine involved balancing 8-hour night shifts with three-hour GA sessions, three to four nights per week for three months, compounded by the physical exhaustion from her kitchen work, language barriers, technological challenges, and additional work as a hairdresser. While she described her experience positively as "good" and "not difficult," it's challenging to determine whether this perception reflects a cultural tendency to avoid victimization narratives or if, within the formal setting of an interview, she felt constrained from voicing such complaints.

When asked about the types of resources she would propose to alleviate participatory challenges for future assembly members, Maria explicitly emphasized the need to address the conditions of participation for those who had to travel to participate, noting that those who could engage in GA digital events from home were in a more privileged position. This statement demonstrates that Maria recognized the asymmetrical opportunities to appear and sustain participation in the GA over time:

> Now, there was a boy there, there were people who participated at home, right? It was easier for them, right, the person with the translator, at home. We saw that some people participated at home, like a girl, there was a pool, a garden. The girl there was from [Latin American country], if I'm not mistaken. She was very "desenrolada" [port. for articulated when speaking] this girl. But most didn't. Like myself, I had to go somewhere else to participate. And I still had to leave work and then come back (Maria, Latin America assembly member).

Another challenging experience illustrates how the interaction between the Global Assembly's design and participants' embodied social markers and cultural contexts—specifically, gender and reproductive labor roles—can intensify vulnerabilities and political constraints already experienced by assembly members.

Consider the case of Priya, a 30-year-old seamstress from South Asia who sought political recognition for her new role as a Global Assembly member from her family by showing them recordings of the deliberative sessions. Living in a small home with her extended family, she couldn't invite the translator to her residence due to the crowded conditions, which forced her to travel to a location designated by her community host to access technology and translation services. Although the Assembly provided resources for rickshaw taxi services, this need for displacement created complex consequences for her.

The GA's requirements significantly impacted Priya's already limited time. She spent three to four nights each week participating in deliberative sessions and commuting between her home and the community host location—a routine she described as a "quite time-consuming job." Instead of managing just the "second shift," or the double burden that women often face balancing domestic and paid work (Hochschild, 1989), she took on a "third shift" by also fulfilling her civic responsibilities. Ultimately, her demanding schedule, compounded by her reproductive labor duties, greatly limited her availability and, consequently, her opportunity to adequately study the learning materials provided as resources for the deliberative sessions:

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

In summary, democratic innovations must account for how assembly members are affected by the interaction between GA design demands and the precarious conditions imposed by neoliberalism, as Della Porta (2015) highlights in the context of social movements. Additionally, systemic structures of domination, such as patriarchy and racism, as discussed by Drake (2023), play a crucial role not only in realizing democratic values but also in ensuring meaningful and transformative experiences. John Dewey (1980) emphasizes that vital experiences emerge when there is a proper balance between stimulating challenges and an organism's struggles, making the experience truly meaningful and positively transformative..

4.2.3 Accessibility to fundamental resources

The third set of vulnerabilities stemmed from the interaction between the GA's requirements and participants' access to the networks of resources—material, social, and symbolic—needed to connect, appear, and participate politically.

Technological and linguistic resources

Technological accessibility proved to be a significant challenge in this digital democratic innovation, with about half of our interviewees lacking the necessary devices or skills to effectively use the online platforms for the Global Assembly. Even without delving into specialized literature on digital participation (cf. James, 2019), it's evident that this represents a key accessibility vulnerability for GA members. However, in cases where the GA hired community hosts to address this issue, the resulting vulnerabilities varied depending on the individual performance of these hosts.

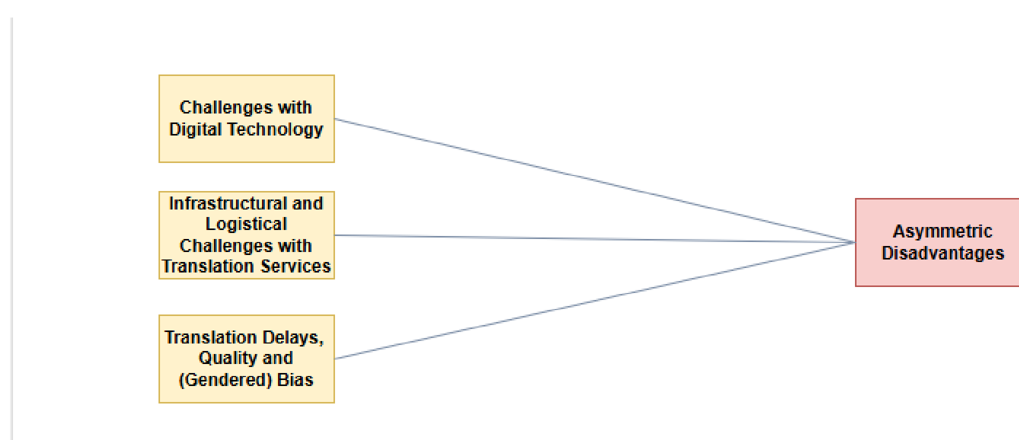

Figure 19: Disadvantages derived from the accessibility of technological and linguistic resources. Source: Author.

Consider the case of Lee, our elderly Southeast Asian respondent. Lee had to rely on his spouse’s laptop to connect to the GA, and his son's backup generator was mobilized to counter the power shortages in his region. Despite owning a router, Lee still faced intermittent connectivity issues. As an elderly fisherman unfamiliar with digital technologies, he found it challenging to navigate the Zoom platform where GA interactions took place, leading to frequent disruptions in his participation. Reflecting on these experiences, Lee shared, “Our deliberation facilitator from Africa would always ask, ‘Where is the assembly member?’ because I'm not good at using the computer, so we would sometimes have problems."

Regarding translation services, our interviewees generally expressed satisfaction with the translators and the quality of translation. Their positive experiences often went beyond mere

language translation, encompassing technical and emotional support, as well as the friendships that developed between participants and their translators. However, despite this positive feedback, some critical issues persisted, occasionally unnoticed by both the assembly members and the GA organizers. In this section, we will focus more on the infrastructure and logistics of the translation services, leaving the analysis of discursive vulnerabilities during deliberative sessions for another chapter.

If, on the one hand, assembly members living in precarious conditions faced vulnerabilities and disadvantages arising from the need to travel to receive translation at their community host's location, on the other hand, those who received translation remotely, in the comfort of their homes, also faced dilemmas. Even Yuyan, the young Eastern Asian participant who seemingly wouldn't face any vulnerabilities in connecting to the GA, encountered problems with remote translation. For her, "maybe due to the internet connection, the translation was not fast enough sometimes, which made people wait for long and wasted people's time."

A case where failures in the implementation of the random selection mechanism of assembly members in the GA interacted with gender dynamics and produced participatory harm for one participant was mentioned by Priya, the seamstress mentioned in the previous section. Priya and her translator observed that another individual, who spoke the same native language, frequently had her viewpoints inaccurately translated or outright ignored by her translator, who was also her husband and the community host who appointed her to participate in the GA. Notably, in both cases where translation quality was an issue, the participants were women, raising concerns about potential patriarchal biases in the translation process that could undermine their sense of democratic recognition:

> I remember there was a lady who used to speak in Hindi, and I could understand it clearly what she was saying. But, when the man who was sitting next to her, helping her in translation, he used to give a different opinion which were not the words of that lady. This was communicated by my madam, as she said, the man is not doing the proper translation. The lady is giving her opinion and the man is saying something else. But I think they were then removed from the assembly as I did not see them later. I think they were from [Southern Asian country] only. And was I being told that the man had brought his wife into the panel. As you are not allowed to bring any family member with you in the panel. They should put someone in assembly who are a common person and who don't know much about climate change. Just like me, who have got help and understanding after attending this global assembly (Priya, South Asia assembly member).

The incident highlighted earlier points to a significant infrastructural challenge within international assemblies like the GA, which may or may not be related to patriarchal cultures: the recruitment and monitoring of translators. Ensuring that translators accurately convey the

intentions and words of the speakers is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the deliberative process. A biased or inaccurate translation can alter the discursive dynamics of the assembly, potentially skewing the decision-making process and affecting outcomes in ways that do not reflect the true consensus of the participants.

This issue extends beyond linguistic accuracy; it concerns upholding a person's sense of democratic recognition—being acknowledged as an equal and as someone with a unique contribution to the political process. In the upcoming chapters, the discursive implications of translation biases will be explored in more detail.

Distribution of responsibilities and resources

The Global Assembly's "holacratic" or decentralized structure was a novel design response to the challenge of connecting, synchronizing, and engaging 100 global citizens along with dozens of other collaborators over three months. The division of tasks—such as assistance, connection, and the transmission of resources and information—between the organizing team and community hosts, grouped by geographical regions and common languages, was key to its functioning. Consequently, this structure meant that community hosts and translators mediated almost every interaction between the GA organizers and the participants. This excessive dependence, as we began to discuss above, can manifest in practice as problems and even harm if not adequately monitored.

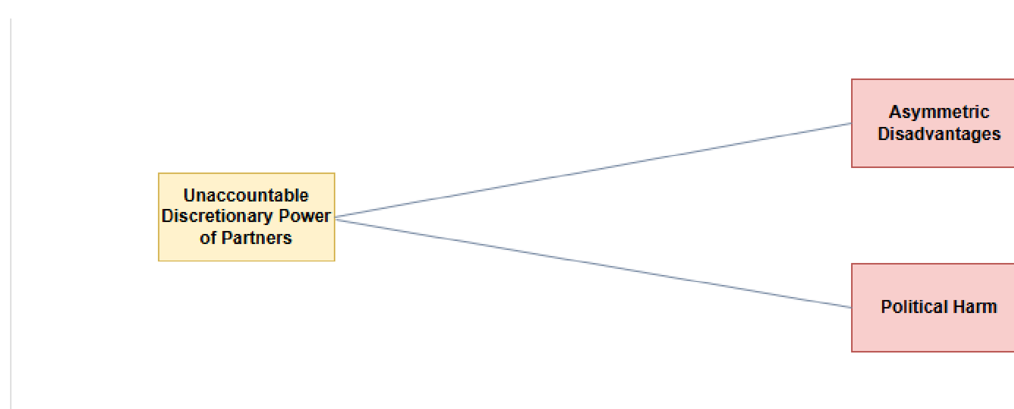

Figure 20: Disadvantages derived from unaccountable discretionary powers of GA partners. Source: Author.

Chima, the assembly member who attributed his selection to the GA as a "grace" from God and who received all the support needed to participate in the digital events of the GA from his home, thanks to his translator, had his intensive dependence on his community host exploited. According to Chima, during his participation in the GA, he had to use personal financial resources—which were especially scarce for him—to cover unexpected participatory

expenses. The GA had a reimbursement policy for such unforeseen costs, but Chima encountered issues with its practical implementation. After submitting a reimbursement request through his community host, he only received a fraction of the expected amount. He explained, “For instance, if the Global Assembly sends $100 for reimbursement for a cost I may have incurred, my community host will give me $10 instead of the full amount.” This situation undoubtedly further strained Chima’s already fragile financial situation, as he was dedicating significant effort to the Assembly while still relying primarily on farming and agricultural activities for his livelihood.

Despite these problems, driven by his desire to continue participating and the self-confidence and self-esteem that his GA relationships had fostered, Chima decided to persist and "to liaise with them until the Global Assembly project came to an end," even though this meant maintaining a dependent relationship with someone who had violated his rights and moral dignity. This ongoing interaction caused not only financial strain but also psychological and political harm, undermining his self-respect, as he described:

> There was a lot of unfairness, injustice, and unfaithfulness based on how the local organisation acted towards me and in partnership with Global Assembly. It affected me knowing that the organisation acted in deception and when I knew the whole truth I do not directly cooperate with the organisation and even the staff members, I cannot even greet anyone from that organisation when we meet or see each other. What they did upset me knowing all my time, energy, and commitment I genuinely invested in Global Assembly deliberations and Global Assembly prepared things for me and not for them, but they were taking the money.

After the Global Assembly concluded, Chima received full financial reimbursement. However, this situation underscored a key dimension of vulnerabilities in participation: the hierarchical relationships among participants, mediators, and organizers, which lacked robust monitoring mechanisms. The initial failure to detect this issue highlighted the need for improved communication channels and stronger oversight. Had the assembly member not taken the initiative to report the problem, it might have gone unnoticed, and the harm caused would have remained unaddressed. This instance emphasized the pressing need to establish effective communication and monitoring systems to ensure equitable participation and fairness within the assembly’s structure.

I will conclude the analysis by reflecting on the significant discretionary power held by community hosts within the Global Assembly (GA). While this innovation in participatory design was crucial for the GA's success, it also presents a critical risk: if not carefully monitored, such power can compromise the integrity of the citizens' assembly’s design, its

claim to democratic legitimacy, and the assembly members' self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem.

During an interview with the East African community host who supported assembly member Jose's participation, we learned, for example, that the initial citizen randomly selected was a woman. However, she lived in a remote village far from the community host's location, where she would have accessed the technology and translation resources necessary to participate in the GA. The community host explained that the only feasible way for her to join the GA, given the need to travel frequently, was to stay in a hotel or someone's house nearby several times a week. This arrangement would have required her to leave her home, job, and other responsibilities behind. Facing time constraints as the GA's start date approached, the community host organization made a discretionary decision to nominate another citizen, Jose, as the assembly member—someone who did not fully match the initial demographic profile expected of a participant from that region.

4.3 Democratic appearance and recognition: grounded theoretical propositions

One of Dewey's (1980) theoretical hypotheses on why "an" experience becomes "a" vital experience is that it promotes a significant and meaningful variation in the way an organism establishes relationships with others and their environment. In this chapter, we explored a series of experiences promoted by the processes of being selected and appearing in GA events, which led to significant variations in our interviewees' habitual modes of democratic recognition. But why was this relevant for these citizens, and why is it relevant for democracies? Under what conditions were these vital experiences threatened by the impositions or demands of the Global Assembly that exacerbated its members' environmental, personal, and resource vulnerabilities? In the following section, I will present three considerations that connect the main findings of this chapter to these questions.

First, the stratified random selection of assembly members and the politically diverse collective that appeared as GA participants were fundamental for this political event to be recognized as democratically legitimate. However, the absence of mechanisms and strategies to address the contextual and intersectional vulnerabilities of potential and actual randomly selected assembly members demands improvement.

Through the analysis, I observed how assembly members understood that the democratic legitimacy and credibility of the GA were highly derived from the demographically stratified random selection process and the tangible manifestation of this human diversity on the digital screens. Assembly member Carlos, for instance, recognized the GA's democratic

attributes when he contrasted the fact that an ordinary citizen like himself had been selected for an event of that scale with the everyday politics of “favoritism” he was accustomed to witnessing in his context. For Yuyan from South Asia and other assembly members, the realization of the GA's democratic legitimacy emerged when they witnessed that the group of participants in the GA’s digital interactions genuinely represented a broad diversity of sociodemographic attributes and cultural backgrounds.

Moreover, the recognition of the GA's democratic legitimacy extended beyond the assembly members' own perceptions. The fact that a randomly and demographically representative body of the global population co-constructed the People’s Declaration was acknowledged by COP-26 officials, which allowed this document to be presented at the international event. Some of these citizens appeared at COP-26 to present the declaration, affirming the GA's democratic legitimacy through their concrete political presence. Additionally, some community hosts successfully promoted certain assembly members as publicly and politically recognized figures in local media and to political representatives, solely because they were randomly selected and participated in the GA—regardless of the quality of their engagement during the learning phase or deliberative interactions.

The idea that the random selection of citizens for political participation events produces a special "aura" of democratic legitimacy, especially when it reflects the demographic diversity of a population, is well established. This principle is so central that mini-publics and citizens' assemblies are often defined precisely by the use of such mechanisms (e.g., OECD, 2021). However, beyond confirming this theoretical hypothesis, the analysis demonstrated that the appearances of assembly members, which presented a diverse and representative picture of the world population, can be deceiving.

The analysis revealed that despite the use of algorithms to select assembly member candidates from randomly drawn geographical points—with their open-source code publicly available—the invitation process exhibited some degree of "favoritism," in Carlos’ terms. This was not due to any hidden interests of GA organizers but stemmed from significant challenges in providing the necessary resources, oversight, and adaptations to ensure that truly any citizen within a specific geographical coordinate in Latin America could be included in the GA draw. Often, only family members and acquaintances were approached for security reasons, as a community host revealed. Furthermore, once participants were randomly selected, difficulties in accessing resources should not have precluded their participation, as was the case in Central Africa. This underscores a vital lesson regarding the global random selection of citizens: it is

essential to understand how vulnerabilities of both citizens and community hosts can vary significantly across different contexts.

Second, participants positively altered their political identities by experimenting with new conditions of democratic appearance and recognition compared to their everyday lives. This change was crucial in motivating them to assume various costs and even make sacrifices to continue their participatory experience. Moreover, they were recognized as “practical” representatives of the GA in other spheres of their lives, which contributed to spreading the experience and influence of the GA. On the other hand, their resilience and response-ability in facing participation challenges should not be romanticized.

The assertion that positive political recognition is essential for citizens in a democracy is well-supported by scholars like Mendonça (2012) and Honneth (1995). Adequate recognition within often unequal and unjust societal structures is critical for individuals' capacity to address and resolve collective issues creatively. The GA provided a platform for such recognition, positively impacting participants' self-confidence, self-respect, and self-esteem, thereby motivating them to endure various participatory costs and sacrifices.

However, it is important to acknowledge that while motivated and democratically recognized citizens may possess the will and capacity to engage in democratic innovation, the participatory costs and sacrifices—particularly for vulnerable individuals—must not be romanticized. Even in well-designed digital deliberative settings, environmental and personal vulnerabilities can translate into concrete political disadvantages (Young, 2001). Moreover, the environmental and sociopolitical characteristics of the specific contexts where participants connected to the GA—such as war, urban violence, neoliberalism, and patriarchy—introduced diverse and asymmetric constraints, and even harm, among our interviewees. While significant response-abilities performed by participants mitigated some of these challenges, they also highlighted the need for better and context-sensitive support mechanisms. The quest to decolonize citizens' assembly models, especially when considering transnational scales, is urgent.

Finally, the conditions of global political appearance afforded by the GA fostered a kind of democratic recognition and sense of social connection between participants that transcended physical and socio-political differences and barriers. The decentralized structure of the GA, supported by community hosts and networks of family and friends, was of utmost importance for this achievement. Yet, the relationships of dependence structured to facilitate assembly members' participation can produce political constraints and harms that need to be carefully addressed.

In *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls articulates a compelling argument about the critical role of positive self-esteem and self-respect in motivating individuals to engage in collective actions and persist in their existential projects. He emphasizes that our self-respect is largely influenced by the respect we receive from others, stating: "Now our self-respect normally depends upon the respect of others. Unless we feel that our endeavors are honored by them, it is difficult if not impossible for us to maintain the conviction that our ends are worth advancing" (Rawls, 1972, p. 178). This recognition from others is essential for maintaining our belief in the value of our goals. Furthermore, Rawls suggests a reciprocal relationship between self-respect and mutual respect: "Moreover, one may assume that those who respect themselves are more likely to respect each other and conversely. Self-contempt leads to contempt of others and threatens their good as much as envy does. Self-respect is reciprocally self-supporting" (Rawls, 1972, p. 179).

The GA provided conditions of appearance and global political engagement that nurtured democratic recognition and fostered a sense of social connection, transcending physical and socio-political differences and barriers. Consequently, participants experienced a positive transformation in their mutual self-esteem and self-respect. This transformation not only bolstered individual conviction and perseverance but also created a globally "reciprocally self-supporting" community. This sense of interconnectedness and mutual support among GA members profoundly and critically impacted their participatory journey.

Participants identified themselves—and were recognized by others—as "practical" political representatives who could bring perspectives from local contexts to the GA and vice versa. This was demonstrated through their participation in traditional media events, showcasing an interesting way of connecting the global and the local. This dynamic allowed them to act as conduits for their communities, enhancing the legitimacy and impact of the GA both globally and locally.

On the other hand, as Judith Butler (2015) argues, to fight for spaces of visibility and recognition, subjects—especially those more vulnerable—depend on diverse networks of support and resources. This theoretical proposition was empirically confirmed on a global and digital scale. The crucial role of community hosts and translators in the GA cannot be overstated, as their support was essential for the technological coordination and engagement of assembly members. For example, community hosts facilitated connections and provided emotional and logistical support that was key to enabling participation in a digital and global setting. Additionally, networks of friends and family played a significant part in supporting participants. Angelito, for instance, used his wife's laptop and his son's power generator to

participate in GA sessions, demonstrating how family resources were leveraged to overcome technological barriers. Similarly, Daniela from Latin America, faced with unreliable internet service at home, relied on her neighbors for access to ensure she could fully participate in GA sessions.

Notwithstanding, we must consider the potential unexpected and even negative effects of establishing political recognition relationships, especially for those more vulnerable. Reflecting on Markell's (1996, p. 31) analysis of the paradoxes and contradictions of relying on states as primary sources of democratic recognition reveals significant insights. When one recognizes an entity as their primary source of recognition, they effectively grant it a form of sovereignty. Still, this sovereignty is inherently problematic because the more one relies on the state for recognition, the more dependent and subordinate one becomes. This dynamic can inadvertently perpetuate existing power imbalances, complicating efforts to achieve true emancipation and equality.

Although I do not consider the relations of democratic recognition that individuals establish with the GA to be equivalent to those that citizens have with states, I aim to highlight that, to experience the recognition afforded by the GA, participants became dependent on—and vulnerable to—the design and the networks of resources and support that enabled their participation.

For instance, the critical role of translators and community hosts sometimes placed assembly members in vulnerable positions regarding their ability to verify the quality and integrity of their contributions. A notable case involved an assembly member whose translator—also her husband and the community host who appointed her to the GA—did not faithfully convey her perspectives during sessions, reproducing patriarchal behaviors from their culture that the GA failed to address. Chima's experience in the GA underscores the risks associated with decentralizing organizational power without robust oversight. Intended to empower local facilitators and increase flexibility, this approach unfortunately led to significant financial burdens for Chima, due to inconsistent distribution of support and a failure to compensate for essential expenses like travel and lost wages. This situation highlights the critical need for stringent monitoring and checks in decentralized systems to ensure that all participants receive equitable support and to prevent the exacerbation of dependencies—although, as vulnerability theories suggest, not all relations of dependence are necessarily problematic.

5 RECONSTRUCTING PERSPECTIVES ON THE CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS IN THE GLOBAL ASSEMBLY “CLASSROOMS”

What was the main reason or "impulse," in John Dewey's (1980) terms, that drove assembly members to commit to the long and demanding Global Assembly (GA) journey, as discussed in the last chapter? We posed this question directly to our interviewees. Most identified their primary motivation as the desire to learn more about the climate and ecological crisis. When asked about the most significant changes the GA brought to their lives, many described shifts in their understanding of climate and environmental issues, as well as the daily tragedies they had witnessed or experienced. In this sense, even if not fully conscious, participants recognized that the GA helped address their epistemic vulnerabilities regarding these issues—a role often attributed to democratic innovations, as discussed in Chapter Two. But how did this process unfold?

In this chapter, I explore the transformative learning experiences afforded to our interviewees through their participation in the GA. The analysis reveals that these experiences, marked by profound personal growth and significantly broadened perspectives, were made possible by various factors. However, it is essential to acknowledge the challenges and asymmetric disadvantages that emerged during the process, as they profoundly shaped participants' journeys and led to important sociological and normative insights. Integrating John Dewey's (1980) concept of vital experiences with the notions of vulnerabilities and intersectionalities presented in Chapter Two of this thesis was instrumental in enhancing the critical dimension of this analysis (Collins, 2012).

One of the key tenets of Dewey's concept of vital experiences is his theoretical exploration of the conditions under which an organism alters its perception and understanding of the world when confronting problems in its immediate reality. In essence, vital experiences occur when individuals are not only emotionally and cognitively affected but also reflective of the key constitutive aspects of their experiences—such as cause-and-effect relationships—and “reconstruct” their knowledge. Dewey defines education as “the reconstruction or reorganization of experience, which adds to the meaning of experience and increases the ability to direct the course of subsequent experiences” (Shyman, 2011, p. 39; Dewey, 1916, p. 77). However, Dewey emphasizes that we can only analyze the ideal conditions for reconstructing knowledge if we do not separate the mind from the body. He posits that while a lack of novelty and challenges fails to provide the emotional engagement necessary to transform an ordinary

experience into a cognitively significant one, excessively precarious or hostile learning conditions can equally hinder this process[36].

To understand what body-mind organisms relied on to have vital learning experiences in the GA, this analysis needed to go beyond examining the challenges that emerged from our interviewees' interactions with the GA's learning devices and environment. It was also essential to explore how the intersections of distinct bodily and social conditions among assembly members shaped their learning processes, leading some individuals to face greater disadvantages than others (Mackenzie, 2014; Cole, 2017). Additionally, drawing on vulnerability theorists (Butler, 2006; 2021), I investigated the response-abilities and relational resiliences that assembly members employed to navigate adversities while pursuing their "impulse" to deepen their understanding of the climate and ecological crisis.

This chapter begins by presenting the most relevant learning experiences narrated by our interviewees during their GA journey. The grounded qualitative analysis revealed that every interviewee reported transformative changes in: (a) how they understood the causes and consequences of the climate and ecological crisis, particularly in relation to their daily lives; (b) their sensitivity to and understanding of how political factors create asymmetries in the way the climate and ecological crisis impacts populations and ecosystems worldwide; and (c) their reflections on possible pathways to address this collective problem, although this area showed less comprehensiveness and critical reflection compared to the other two epistemic transformations.

As I will argue, the main factors contributing to these transformative experiences—addressing individual epistemic and decision-making vulnerabilities as defined at the end of Chapter Two—were the efforts of participants to consider, compare, and connect the different sources of information they encountered in the GA. This was particularly evident in how they related testimonies from guest speakers and fellow participants, who shared how their living conditions had deteriorated due to extreme climate events, with their own lived experiences of the environmental crisis. This dynamic reinforces John Dewey's (1980) theory on the conditions under which experiences become vital.

The chapter then explores the learning challenges and disadvantages faced by interviewees, as described in their narratives from the GA's learning phase. The interaction

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[36] To elucidate the ideal circumstances under which an ordinary experience attains vitality, Dewey employs the metaphor of an organism's breathing, characterized by a rhythm of "intakings and outgivings." When a substantial impediment disrupts this rhythm, upsetting the equilibrium between active engagement and passive reception of experiences, it obstructs the possibility of its fulfillment and, consequently, undermines the potential for positive self-reconstruction. (Dewey, 1980, p.56).

between the GA’s design elements and learning demands, combined with participants' diverse environmental and sociodemographic conditions, created distinct—and often asymmetric—obstacles to accessing the information provided by GA materials and activities. These experiences are categorized into four general areas based on their predominant characteristics and constitutive factors: (a) interactions with learning materials; (b) personal and bodily conditions affecting access to learning materials; (c) engagement in GA interactive learning sessions; and (d) interactions with scientific experts.

In addition to the “analytic stories” of vital and challenging learning experiences presented in this chapter, I have included diagrams, following suggestions from Grounded Theory analysts, to facilitate the visualization of the main dimensions of these categorized experiences. It is important to note that these diagrams do not illustrate cause-and-effect relationships but rather highlight the constitutive characteristics of events and interactional processes.

5.1 Reconstructing understandings and becoming more politically sensitive to a complex collective problem

As we considered in Chapter 2, democratic innovations rooted in deliberative democracy aim to enhance epistemic functions of democracy by fostering citizens' ability to generate creative solutions to collective problems and understand diverse social perspectives. Stewart (1996, p. 32) highlights their role in bringing "informed views of ordinary citizens into government," while Goodin (2008, p. 2) emphasizes their capacity to help citizens "see things from each other’s point of view." Central to this process is the power of exchanging knowledge and experiences, which, as Hannah Arendt (1958) argues, promotes an "enlarged mentality" among citizens, enabling them to see beyond their immediate perspectives and engage more deeply with complex issues. Not by coincidence, political theorists like Niemeyer (2013) argue that democratic innovations are particularly well-suited to address complex problems like climate change, as they make salient the less tangible dimensions of such challenges and foster collective reflection. Yet, this raises a critical question: Are all citizens equally capable of engaging in such exchanges, given the variations in vulnerabilities they face—including those tied to the climate crisis itself—and how might these differences impact their ability to form more complex and critical understandings of this pressing issue?

Articulating causes and effects of the climate crisis

Our interviewee, Maria, a 60-year-old cook from Latin America, shared that her primary motivation for participating in the assembly was her desire to learn more about the climate emergency. However, beyond facing numerous challenges to attend and connect with the assembly, she also encountered significant difficulties in understanding the information presented. As she explained, "I haven't studied for many years. I'm 62 years old. I stopped studying when I was 16 or 17; I just worked after that." This personal vulnerability—her limited formal education—interacted with the assembly's learning journey design, creating additional disadvantages for her. Despite these challenges, I will now focus on demonstrating how individuals like Maria—ordinary citizens with minimal formal education and no prior knowledge of complex issues—can develop richer perspectives and deeper understanding through participation in the GA.

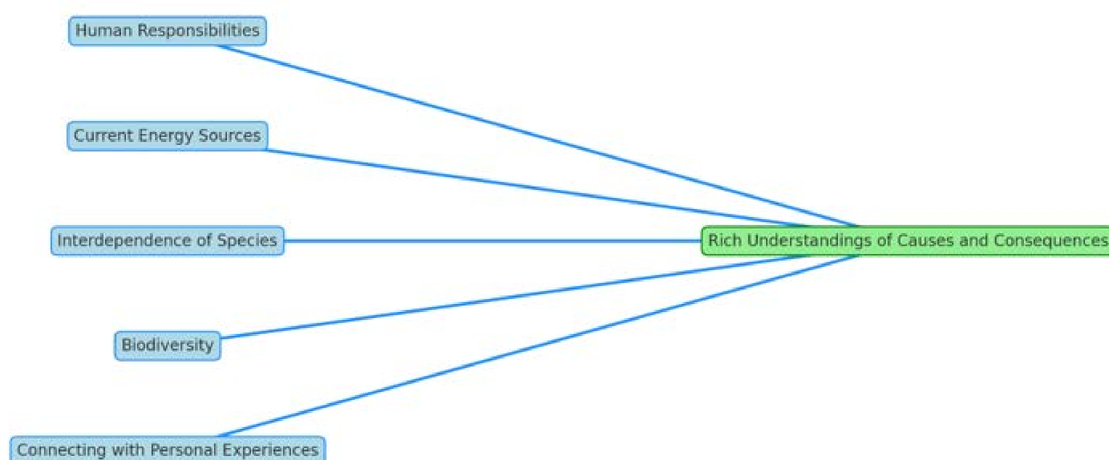

Figure 21: Enriching understanding of the causes and consequences of climate and environmental crisis.
Source: Author.

When reconstructing her learning experience in the GA, Maria reflected that her understanding of the causes of severe weather events in her daily life had improved, thanks to the information and support provided. However, upon closer analysis using Dewey's (1980) concept of *vital experience*, it becomes clear that what truly enabled her and other assembly members to internalize this knowledge was their ability to compare and connect the information they received—whether scientific or experiential—with the everyday climate and environmental issues they witness or face.

When asked how the GA impacted her personally, Maria's first response was to highlight the increased rainfall and rising sea levels in her city. She explained, "The sea tide has advanced, right? It has destroyed restaurants and demolished houses." Confronted with

these tangible consequences, she shared how the GA helped her reconsider the causes of such events: "I used to think everything was God's fault. But what I learned there is that it's not quite like that—unfortunately, humans aren't helping, and neither are the governments."

Beyond reevaluating her initial understanding of severe weather events, Maria also gained new insights. During the interview, she confidently articulated that burning fossil fuels is one of the primary drivers of environmental disasters. She also expanded her understanding of the scale and future projections of climate emergencies. Despite having personally experienced extreme weather events, Maria admitted she had never before had access to information about "what's to come in the next year. I didn't know about the global movement or the increase in rain, wind, and destruction. I learned all of that there." For her, this knowledge highlighted the gap between ordinary citizens and experts, underscoring the value of learning from the latter: "They know all this because they studied. They understand the weather, the years, how things could get better or worse. We don't, because we didn't study." A deeper analysis of the participatory disadvantages between assembly members and experts will be explored later.

Maria's transformative learning experience was not unique. All interviewees, including those with limited formal education and no high school diploma, demonstrated a remarkable grasp of key ecological concepts introduced during the GA. For instance, Kemba, a high school student from Southern Africa, found the discussion on "conservation and restoration" particularly valuable, as it resonated with his experience of living in a rural area affected by "uncontrolled burning." Similarly, Lee, a fisherman from Southeast Asia, expressed deep concern about declining fish populations due to pollution. He found the discussions on biodiversity and the interdependence of species especially meaningful, reconciling his religious views with scientific knowledge: "Everything God created—plants, insects—each has a role in biodiversity. We're not always aware of how they help maintain it." Additionally, Raj, a retired senior from South Asia, troubled by the phenomenon of "black snow" in his country, shared a transformative realization: "I learned that what we think of as development is actually destruction."

The experiential analysis revealed that the learning experiences and concepts that most profoundly impacted the assembly members—and were most easily recalled—were those they could readily apply to make sense of the challenges they faced in their daily lives. As John Dewey (1980) theorized, the capacity of knowledge to be practically appropriated, changing how individuals perceive or control relationships and effects in their lives, is a crucial condition for an experience to become *vital*.

Consider the testimony of Chima, a subsistence farmer from Southern Africa, who developed a nuanced understanding of climate change through his participation in the GA. Chima shared that he has witnessed many adverse climate events firsthand: "I've seen rivers and lakes dry up that once had plenty of water, and this has severely affected our agricultural productivity." However, the GA helped him realize that these events are not "natural" but are caused by human activities: "I never knew that people's actions contribute to the climate change we're experiencing." Reflecting on this revelation, Chima described it as his "most memorable experience," emphasizing that this knowledge is not just a personal achievement but a valuable tool to be shared: "Knowledge isn't meant to be held by one person; it should be shared to help save communities."

Chima's experience exemplifies Dewey's (1939a) hypothesis that transformative experiences in participatory events can create spill-over effects, extending to other aspects of daily life and addressing the epistemic vulnerabilities of those who did not directly participate in the GA. This was also evident in Maria's case. As an elderly cook, she seized every opportunity to discuss the causes of climate events with her clients and restaurant owners. Similarly, Marta, a retired woman from Latin America, began connecting the use of plastic cutlery at family barbecues to global environmental emergencies after her participation in the GA. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will further analyze the spillover effects of the GA on participants' daily lives.

The climate and ecological crisis are political

Beyond deepening their understanding of the causes and consequences of these crises, evidence suggests that our interviewees became more attuned to the asymmetric ways this global problem affects different populations. Many also recognized that the most vulnerable communities have varying capacities to address the issue and that countries bear unequal responsibilities for perpetuating the crisis.

However, this heightened political awareness was not solely the result of information from the GA learning booklet or presentations by invited experts. The analysis revealed that the most impactful experiences for our interviewees were the lived testimonies of invited witnesses and fellow assembly members whose precarious situations had worsened due to climate events. These personal stories played a crucial role in fostering a more political perspective among participants.

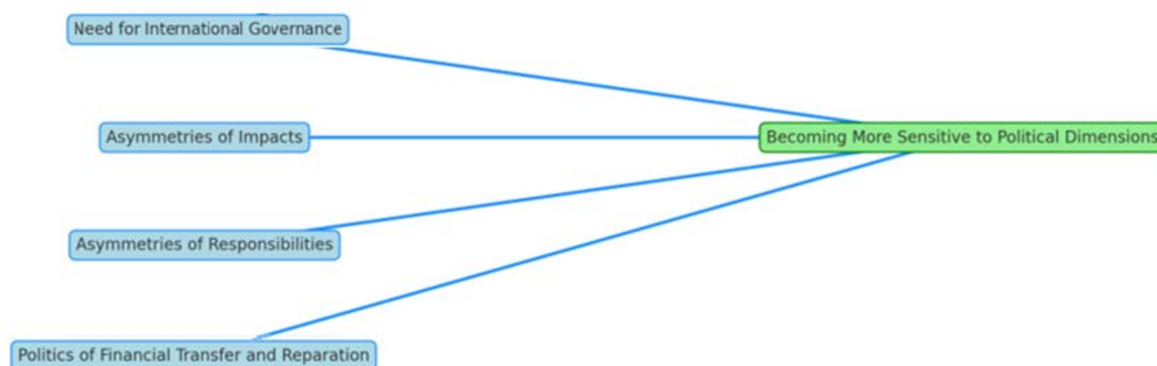

Figure 22: Becoming more sensitive to climate and ecological crisis political dimensions. Source: Author

Jin, a marketing assistant from Eastern Asia, highlighted the significant role that scientific experts played in helping him grasp the complexities of the climate and ecological crisis during GA discussions. One particularly challenging topic for him was reducing carbon emissions and the energy transition. As he gained a deeper understanding of these issues, Jin realized that addressing such "big problems" would not only "take time" but also require "multi-support from governments, institutions, and communities."

Other participants, in addition to recognizing the importance of a global system of governance to tackle the climate and ecological emergency, also considered it imperative to account for the asymmetry of responsibilities between countries in that process.

Amina, a participant originally from a conflict zone in Western Asia but now living abroad, shared this perspective. Like Jin, she realized the importance of global cooperation, stating, "No matter how hard one country works to protect the environment, it will not be sufficient. We have to work together, or it will not work." However, Amina went further in her reflections. A GA video presentation on "the right to development," which featured "people speaking from experience about their own misery," fundamentally changed her understanding of what "working together" entails. She explained that these testimonies demonstrated to her the imperative for the "biggest exporters of gas and emissions" to assume greater responsibility for the impacts of the climate crisis and to aid "people who lost their land and those who were displaced" because of harmful climate events..

Transformative political experiences like Amina’s were not limited to individuals with high levels of formal education, prior knowledge of climate change, or experience working in human rights. A co-occurrence analysis of the sociodemographic characteristics of our interviewees and the codes related to these epistemic transformative experiences demonstrated that every participant, regardless of background, developed a political understanding of this complex problem.

Consider the case of Lee, a Southeast Asian fisherman, who demonstrated that a lack of formal education is no barrier to developing a richer and more critical perspective on the climate crisis through participation in a citizen assembly. On the one hand, as a fisherman, Lee has experienced how fish populations are becoming scarcer daily, "especially because of the power plants being built in the area." He fears that "there will come a time when no fish can be caught in this area because of these coal plants." Still, during the interview, he reflected that the GA helped him realize his situation was not isolated. He learned that countries like India and China are also deeply affected by the environmental impacts of coal plants. This broader perspective led him to conclude, "We are not joking when we say that the world is in an environmental emergency."

Lee's political perspective extended beyond viewing climate and environmental change as a global emergency. By being exposed to testimonies from people whose lives had become more precarious due to the climate crisis, Lee learned not only abstract facts but also about "their experiences." He recognized that different countries, especially those with "overpopulation," are "finding it difficult to make a living," particularly because of "more severe calamities such as storms." Reflecting on the scale and asymmetries of responsibilities and capacities to tackle this problem, Lee now believes that beyond the urgency to "meet in order to gain insights from all over the world," the "poorer countries should be given aid by richer countries because otherwise, climate change will not be addressed." In this sense, Lee argues that global governance must be complemented by additional international political measures, such as financial compensation and resource transfer mechanisms from wealthy nations to those most affected by climate change, to effectively address this large-scale problem.

Ok, but what to do? Decision Making-Vulnerabilities in the Learning Journey

Interviewees who were particularly impacted by testimonies of climate change-related precarity became more sensitive to the political asymmetries surrounding the capacities and responsibilities of addressing this complex issue. This finding aligns with the propositions of theorists like Jacques Rancière. In synthesis, Rancière defines “scenes of politics” as spaces where participants' equality or inequality is demonstrated through the act of questioning “a dominant order that erases conflicts, differences, and resistances” (Marques, 2022, p. 4). One possible democratic consequence of such political scenes, according to Rancière, is how they prompt us to rethink and discuss how a naturalized and dominant “distribution of the sensible”

contributes to determining the conditions of (in)visibility and precarity of distinct bodies within a social topography[37] (Marques and Veloso, 2022, p.406).

On the other hand, although assembly members considered new courses of action to address the climate and ecological crisis, the comparative qualitative analysis of their experiences revealed that these reflections were insufficient to resolve many uncertainties and questions about the trade-offs of those potential paths. As I will demonstrate, the challenges and disadvantages encountered during the learning journey hindered participants' opportunities to challenge ingrained understandings of this complex collective problem and to support action plans aimed at deep structural transformations in society. Drawing on the definitions presented in Chapter Two, which were developed after reviewing the literature on democratic innovations, the GA effectively addressed many of the citizens' epistemic vulnerabilities. However, it did not fully resolve their decision-making vulnerabilities in terms of identifying more effective and democratic solutions to collective problems.

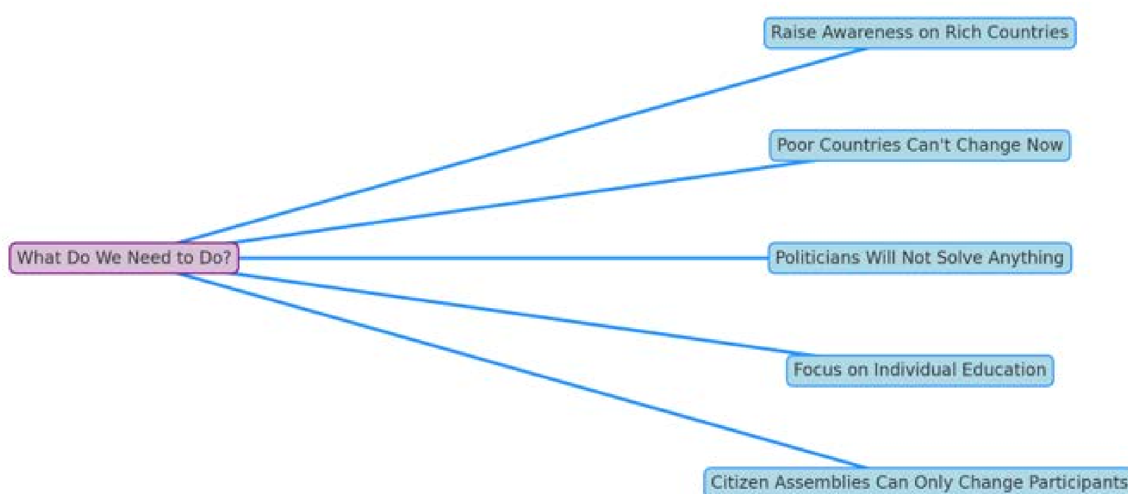

Figure 23: Uncertain conclusions on what to do to address the climate and ecological crisis effectively. Source: Author.

Consider the case of Muhammad, an engineer from Western Asia living abroad. Muhammad was particularly moved by a specific GA testimony of climate precarity presented by a fellow assembly member. He recounted, "When they asked for a participant to talk about

[37] That is, when "Certain subjects who are not considered create a common polemical scene where they question the objective status of what is given and impose an examination and discussion of those things that were previously invisible or not considered". (Rancière, 2010, p. 125)

their personal experience with climate change and how it directly affected their life, causing them to lose their job and income." Being exposed to this narrative made Muhammad realize, "It could happen to me too, so it changed my perception and behavior through this experience."

Nevertheless, when it came to determining what political actions should be taken to address precarious situations like the one described, Muhammad expressed pessimism about the possibility of structural changes in the energy sectors of economically struggling countries. He explained, "Despite the significant and powerful impact of climate change on the economic and political situation, people can't afford to make this effort." For this reason, he believes activism and political participation events, like the GA, should focus more on influencing people in countries with stronger economies. He remarked, "Because if I keep talking for another ten years about climate change in Arab countries, as an example, they won't seriously consider it."

Other interviewees, who bear distinct intersections of social markers such as gender, age, economic situation, and level of formal education, also expressed uncertainty about the effectiveness of transformative political actions aimed at modifying carbon-based energy sources in economically disadvantaged countries. Although they were deeply affected by testimonies of climate precarity at the GA, they remained unsure about how to implement such changes in contexts where financial and structural constraints are significant.

Raj, a retired senior from South Asia, demonstrated a nuanced understanding of the economic asymmetries among countries regarding their capacity to address climate change. On the one hand, he acknowledged that his country possesses the technological and intellectual capabilities to tackle the problem. Nevertheless, he lamented the financial constraints that hinder progress: "We have ideas and technologies in our country, but still, we do not have money." Despite this awareness, Raj was not fully convinced about the most fair and effective way to reduce carbon-based energy sources in less vibrant economies that still rely on them, particularly at the individual level.

> They talk about reducing. But the guy who gets a few pieces of broken wood from somewhere for cooking or making tea at a street stall (...) And I have noticed that some people pick up coal from railway tracks, which are left over from trains passing by. They collect those coal and take them home for cooking. How can you stop them from doing that?" (Raj, South Africa assembly member).

Raj's experiences shed light on the real-life challenges that less economically affluent countries face in addressing the climate crisis. He raises valid concerns about the practicality of implementing environmental measures without exacerbating poverty. Interestingly, despite recognizing the clear disparities in how the climate crisis affects different nations, he does not

advocate for holding wealthier countries accountable—a proposition that other interviewees considered essential for promoting climate justice.

Let's now turn to Maria, the cook from Latin America, who now views the climate emergency as a human responsibility rather than an act of God. During the interviews, she was deeply affected by the testimony of a "boy, who was just like me," who suffered greatly from tragedies caused by heavy rains, especially because "nobody solved anything" in his context, referring to the lack of government action. Having experienced severe financial difficulties herself and having identified similar struggles in other participants and experiential witnesses at the GA, Maria considers many proposed solutions to mitigate climate change, such as transitioning to cleaner energy sources for vehicles, to be insufficient. She explained, "Many people couldn't afford it because it would cost a lot of money. It would improve many people's lives, but not everyone can."

Despite recognizing the impact of socioeconomic asymmetries on the feasibility of large-scale climate measures, Maria repeatedly emphasized during the interview that the political interventions most inspiring to her were those aimed at transforming individual behavior, particularly through education. She defended this position, even in the context of the GA's debates on global climate governance, due to her intense distrust of political representatives. She argued, "Politicians already have a good car and house; they are not concerned with those who don't." Additionally, Maria believes strongly, based on her personal experience, that many climate problems stem from ordinary people ignoring facts about climate change and being unwilling to change their worldviews and attitudes. Unlike them, she feels she has "opened her eyes" to the issue thanks to the GA.

> For example, when we see it on the news and say it will rain. Then people say: "How do you know? Who knows is God!". But the people don't want to understand, I say, "but that's what they study," to understand the water (...) That's why everything relates to education, right, to have a better world. Unfortunately, schools have to teach better, right? (…) Then it's like this, "because God wants, it's because Jesus let it." And it's not like that. People who have to improve themselves (Maria, Latin America assembly member).

In the sentence above, we can see how, for Maria, a bottom-up transformation of society—starting with changes in individual behavior—is the most effective approach to addressing the climate crisis. This belief is so strong for her that, when questioned about the transformative power of the GA in international climate governance, she responded, "To tell you the truth, I think it changes people. People who didn't know, who didn't learn, even though they were seeing things. It changes us." However, she added, "These people who have money, the politicians, I think these people don't care."

This raises an important question: Could the GA have provided more opportunities for Maria and others to reconsider their questions and doubts and explore alternative political approaches to addressing the climate crisis? For instance, could it have encouraged deeper engagement with international governance systems or even the use of citizen assemblies as tools for systemic change, rather than focusing primarily on transforming individual behavior?

5.2 Challenges, disadvantages, and response-abilities in the GA learning journey

The experiential analysis of interviews revealed that the GA learning journey, which provided valuable scientific and political information to assembly members, helped them develop a more nuanced understanding of the cause-and-effect relationships underlying the climate and ecological crises. The scientific information provided by experts, combined with the powerful testimonies of individuals whose lives had become more precarious due to extreme climate events, heightened their sensitivity to the asymmetrical impacts on vulnerable populations and the unequal responsibilities of different countries in perpetuating this global crisis. Participants also expanded their understanding of potential courses of action to address the climate emergency. On the other hand, the research demonstrated that many interviewees did not seem to have had sufficient opportunities to address personal questions or challenge ingrained beliefs regarding the efficacy and feasibility of different approaches, particularly those aimed at broader infrastructural and sociopolitical transformations.

While this thesis cannot provide a definitive answer to the question of whether the GA could have broadened participants' perspectives on systemic solutions—nor does it claim that assembly members are wrong in their judgments about the effectiveness of democratic innovations and citizen assemblies (e.g., Pogrebinschi and Ryan, 2018; Curato et al., 2021)—the experiential analysis of the assembly members' journey highlights several factors that may have limited this potential. Some of these factors will be explored in the next chapter, where I examine the deliberative experiences of our interviewees. In the following section, I will demonstrate how the interaction between sociodemographic vulnerabilities and the GA's design of informational materials and learning environments produced diverse learning challenges and disadvantages.

Following the Grounded Theory methodology outlined in Chapter 3, it was possible to map, analyze, and reconstruct how different sources of vulnerability—though often difficult to disentangle—interacted with the design and demands of the GA to create asymmetric learning challenges and disadvantages. At the same time, the analysis also identified instances of response-abilities (Butler and Athanasiou, 2016), as well as resilience and resistance, within

these four intersecting but methodologically distinct categories. These responses varied in their success at mitigating the disadvantages encountered.

Main Sources of Vulnerabilities	**Definition**	**Observations**
Design of Learning Materials	Learning challenges and disadvantages related to the design of GA learning materials.	The GA Information Booklet has several characteristics, including length and volume of information, vocabulary, lack of graphs and images, practicality of handling, and practical relevance.
Personal and Bodily Conditions for Accessing Learning Materials	Factors related to personal and physical conditions affecting access to learning materials.	Considerations include physical condition, age-related vulnerabilities, long distances from educational environments, and a lack of design devices.
GA Learning Sessions	Challenges and disadvantages faced during GA learning sessions.	Issues related to the frequency and duration of sessions, limited support from family, and student-teacher interactional structure.
Learning from Scientific Experts	Challenges and disadvantages in learning from scientific experts.	Factors include the predominance of English-speaking specialists, pace of presentation, short duration of presentations, limited time for interaction with experts, complex vocabulary, the general performance of the experts, translation strategy, and lack of images and graphics.

Table 20: Challenges and disadvantages experienced in the GA learning journey. Source: Author.

5.2.1 Design of learning materials

Although a digital Wiki[38] page and an unfinished "animated slideshow" were provided to the assembly members, our interviewees primarily recalled the Information Booklet as their practical learning resource. Only Carlos, an undergraduate Latin American student, mentioned accessing information on the GA website during the interviews. However, he noted that the page was in English, and he could only translate the information little by little. As a result, the only learning experience analyzed in this chapter is the Information Booklet.

Developed with contributions from the GA Knowledge and Wisdom Advisory Committee, the booklet's content is based not only on scientific research related to the climate and ecological crises but also on social science perspectives addressing "systemic drivers" and "blockers of change," including political economy and psychology. Additionally, the lived experiences of communities affected by climate change and biodiversity loss, particularly those with indigenous knowledge, were incorporated into the document (Global Assembly Team,

[38] Featuring content on 19 languages, The Global Assembly's wiki served as both a repository for learning resources and a participatory platform for collaborative information generation and translation. It hosted content created by the Core Delivery Team, contextualized contributions from community hosts and Cluster Facilitators, and crowdsourced inputs from the general public, all distinguished by their authorship to maintain accountability (Global Assembly Team, 2022, p.83).

2022, p. 83). According to the GA organizers, one of the primary challenges in compiling the booklet was converting complex data and information into accessible, engaging, and easily translatable content.

Figure 24: Cover of the GA information booklet. Source: Global Assembly Team (2022).

The 46-page Information Booklet is structured into a logical sequence of topics, ranging from the climate and ecological crisis, its projected scenarios and pathways, discussions on climate politics and justice, and even a special section on future directions in global climate governance post-COP26. Additionally, the booklet includes a glossary with 25 terms to assist readers in understanding specialized terminology, such as "Adaptation," "Biodiversity," and "Carbon budget." The table below summarizes the main structure of the booklet.

Information Booklet Section	Pages	Objectives
Introduction	3	To provide an overview and context for the content
Summary Overview	4	To summarize the main points and objectives of the booklet
What is the Climate Crisis, Ecological Crisis, and Why are we in a climate and ecological crisis?	8	To define and explain the climate and ecological crisis and to explore the underlying causes and contributing factors.
International Negotiations	4	To provide an overview of global efforts and agreements

Impacts on…	6	To illustrate the wide-ranging effects of climate change and biodiversity loss considering impacts on Human Health and Livelihoods, Food Security, Water Security, - Land-based Biodiversity and Ecosystems, Oceans and Marine Life
Scenarios and Pathways	5	To explore potential future outcomes and predictive complexities
Actions Already Being Taken	4	To highlight current efforts in energy transition, conservation, and global awareness
Distribution and Fairness	3	To address the unequal impacts and responsibilities associated with climate change
COP26 and Beyond	3	To provide insights into future directions and ongoing international efforts
Glossary	2	To assist readers in understanding specialized terminology (25 terms)

Table 21: Structure of the GA Information Booklet. Source: Author.

In general, the interviewees expressed high satisfaction with the Learning Booklet provided by the Global Assembly. However, some participants, particularly those without prior knowledge of the climate crisis and those with lower education levels, faced significantly more challenges accessing this learning material than others, even though the booklet was translated into their native language.

The diagram below, Figure 4, illustrates the experiential challenges and disadvantages related to accessing the Information Booklet, as reconstructed through the grounded analysis of the interviews. These challenges will be analytically expanded upon in the subsequent sections of the chapter.

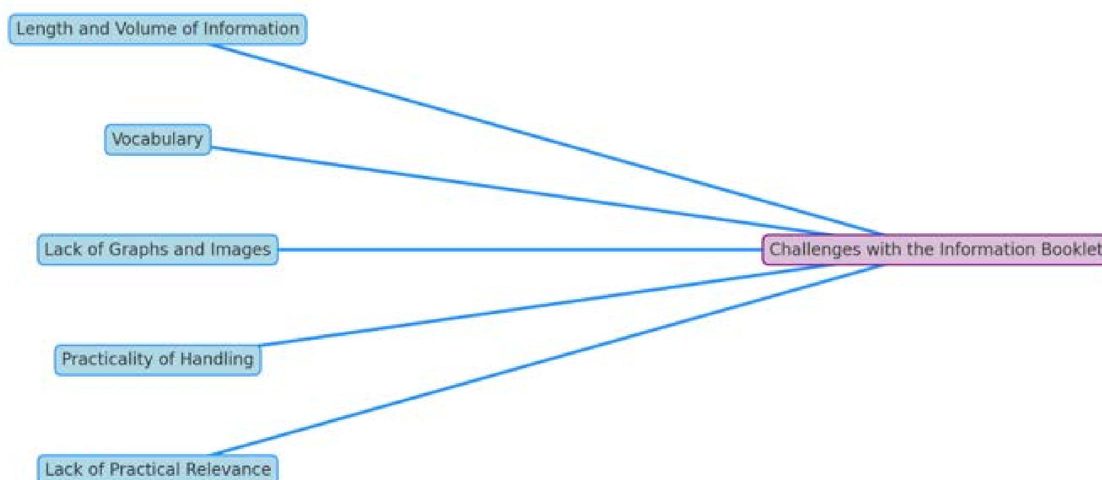

Figure 25: Experiential challenges in accessing the learning booklet. Source: Author.

Information Booklet "Mental laziness"

The youngest interviewee highlighted that the volume of information was a significant barrier to engagement with the Information Booklet. Kemba, a high school student from Southern Africa, expressed this sentiment when asked if he had shown the booklet to his friends and, if so, what their reactions were. He explained, "I can tell they can get mentally lazy to pick

up a paper and summarize (the booklet). They can see that there are too many pages to read all that. So they can have this 'mental laziness.'"

My initial reaction when analyzing this experience was to reflect on the importance of creating learning materials that are both meaningful and aesthetically significant, as Dewey (1980) would suggest, for assembly members and others who may interact with the material. This could be an unexpected way for the GA experience to impact non-participant citizens. However, considering the conditions of this situation, it's unfortunate that Kemba did not clarify whether factors beyond the number of pages contributed to this "mental laziness" among people his age. Nonetheless, based on other interviews, we have good reasons to believe additional factors were involved.

Problems with the length and volume of information in the booklet were not limited to the experiences of high school students. Yuyan, an undergraduate from Eastern Asia, praised the booklet's writing style, which she found clear and accessible. However, she also felt that the booklet was "a little bit too long" to read before each breakout session, which occurred at least three times per week. While assembly members were not expected to read the entire booklet before each session—only specific topics—the overall volume of information could have hindered their ability to delve deeply into the topics, fully grasp the material, and even conduct preparatory readings before the deliberative sessions, as we will consider in the next section. In any case, the rhythm of appropriating new experiences and learning—the "in-breaths and outtakes," as Dewey (1980) describes—must be recognized as a crucial condition for fostering vital experiences.

When considering the experiences of our interviewees who didn't have the opportunity to finish high school, the length and vocabulary of the learning booklet were also seen as obstacles. Chima, a farmer from Central Africa, shared his difficulties with the vocabulary in the Information Booklet. He mentioned that some topics "were not easy to answer" and suspected the issue was due to "the words they used (...) may have been hard to translate and grasp with full meaning and understanding." Reviewing the booklet shows why this might have been challenging for Chima. As I mentioned earlier, the glossary alone includes 25 scientific terms related to the climate and ecological crisis, which are difficult even for native English speakers to understand and even harder to translate. Additionally, the booklet is overloaded with data, numbers, and technical jargon. Consider this extract, for instance:

> Estimates of where an Amazon tipping point could lie range from 40 percent deforestation to just 20 percent forest-cover loss. About 17 percent has been lost since 1970, with large areas being lost due to human deforestation every minute. Moving closer to tipping points such as ice sheets melting, deforestation, melting of permafrost and changes in ocean circulation (or a combination of these) creates a cycle which

> scientists refer to as a “feedback loop”, where climate change causes a cascade of effects that result in even more climate change (…) These feedback loops are “non-linear”, meaning they can accelerate in sudden and unexpected ways and could arise in a way that science has not been able to predict. (Global Assembly Information Booklet, 2021, p.32).

The length of the text, vocabulary, and other factors may have contributed to the difficulty of accessing the information booklet. For Marta, a retired elderly assembly member from Latin America, the problem was that “they did not have many images, they were few.” This was also the experience of Nala, a Central African vendor in her fifties, who felt that the issue with the learning booklet “was that it was full of text. It was all text, with no pictures.” To be precise, there were no images in the information booklet beyond the cover.

As we know, images are of utmost importance not only for educational purposes—enhancing understanding, aiding memory retention, and facilitating learning—but also for making an informative product compelling and attractive. In this sense, they contribute to creating the "aesthetic significance" necessary for an experience to become vital (Dewey, 1980). Moreover, in contemporary political theory, images have been considered important devices for questioning and reorganizing the hegemonic regimes of visibility, including by demonstrating how nature and extra-human beings have an inalienable interest in persevering in their existence (Mendonça et al., 2022; Veloso and Marques, 2022). In sum, the absence of visual aids could have significantly contributed to some participants' difficulties engaging with the material.

Our interviewees also considered the practical dimensions of the booklet, both in its use during GA discussions and in the everyday lives of citizens. Jin, a marketing assistant from Eastern Asia, found that "the sequence seemed problematic, and it was hard to find the right paragraph when we were in discussion." In other words, while the booklet’s sequence of topics may have had a clear logic for those who designed it, for Jin, the sequence was not easy to navigate, especially during the GA breakout sessions where participants needed to reference propositions and clarify questions with others.

Regarding the practical relevance of the booklet, interviewees felt that this aspect was not straightforward. Priya, a South Asian seamstress, articulated her frustration with the significance of the topics discussed during the assembly. She questioned the purpose of engaging with certain concepts, reflecting a sense of disconnection: "Yes, sometimes I did face situations where I could not understand some concepts or even the information. And I thought, why must I learn this or understand this? What’s the purpose of it?" Her comments underscore the need for the information to be not only accessible but also clearly relevant and directly applicable to the participants' real-world experiences.

As I will demonstrate in the next section, community hosts and translators were of utmost importance to the interviewees in clarifying climate and ecological crisis topics and vocabulary presented in the information booklet and the GA in general. However, some challenges that emerged in attempting to engage with the information booklet resulted from these support actors.

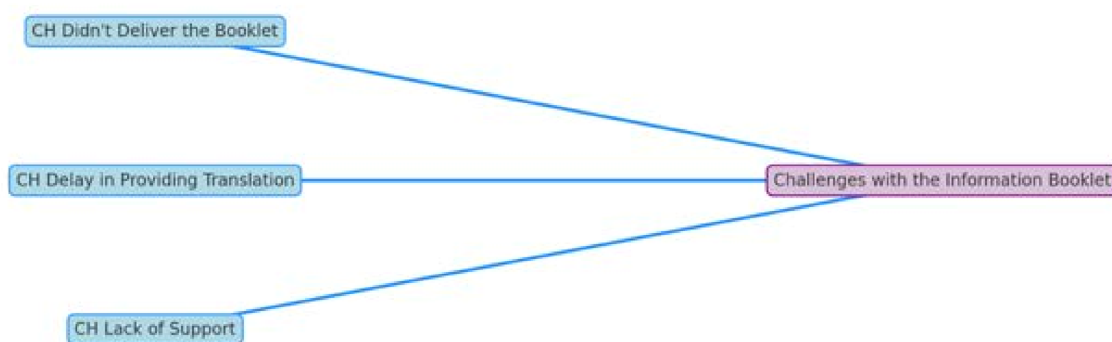

Figure 26: Experiential challenges in accessing the learning booklet due to community hosts (in)actions. Source: Author.

In the case of Muhammad, an engineer from Western Asia, it appears his community host committed one of the most significant functional failures. According to Muhammad, he "didn't receive any information booklet. The information was delivered orally; there was no booklet." This lack of access to the information booklet hindered the parity of participation that Muhammad should have experienced in the GA breakout sessions and posed a normative issue for the process. Perhaps with the information booklet, Muhammad would have had more opportunities to challenge his ingrained belief that citizens of less wealthy regions cannot support significant changes in the carbon-based energy infrastructure of their countries, as he argued in the interview and as we considered in the previous section.

Another functional issue related to community hosts providing the information booklet was the delay in delivering translated learning materials. This was the case for Chima, from Central Africa, who expressed frustration about the late availability of materials in his native language. He suggested, "It could be effective for the Global Assembly to send us the information packet that may have already been translated into my language." This suggestion is particularly relevant because he received the translated information booklet in parts rather than as a complete document. There are good reasons to believe that this piecemeal delivery likely prevented him from organizing his studies effectively before the deliberative sessions

and from gaining an overview of the entire document to understand how the theoretical information in the initial chapters connected to later sections.

Finally, in the case of Lee, a fisherman from Southeast Asia, the main challenges he faced with the information booklet stemmed from the limited remote support provided by his community host. He shared that "sometimes before the meeting starts, they would call me and explain things to me." While Lee's experience indicates some level of support, his use of the term "sometimes" highlights that this support was sporadic, making it unreliable. As I will discuss later, consistent interaction with community hosts and translators was crucial for other elderly assembly members to clarify information, stay motivated, and engage meaningfully with the assembly's learnings and discussions.

Limited sources of information

One of the questions we posed to interviewees was whether they sought additional information or conducted their own research during the GA journey. Our aim was to understand whether they had the opportunity to compare or question the information presented to them about the climate and environmental crisis and, in doing so, develop a more critical awareness of misinformation or disinformation. Maria, the elderly cook from Latin America, exemplifies the typical response we received. According to her, "I didn't get to research it. I only used the papers that we took home." In cases of doubt, beyond seeking help from her nephew at home—as we will explore in the next section—she limited herself to asking questions to her translator or the facilitator of the breakout room.

Figure 27: Not accessing additional references to our learning sources beyond GA. Source: Author.

Chima, a subsistence farmer from Central Africa, presented another relevant perspective on this topic. He reported that he "never" conducted personal research on the topics to be debated in the GA breakout rooms because "before starting the assembly, we were prohibited from doing our own research" as "they encourage us to each think of fresh and new ideas that cannot be found online."

As a former GA notetaker, I have an ethnographic anecdote that illustrates this situation. On one occasion, a facilitator I worked with shared a link to a climate crisis-related video in a WhatsApp group with the assembly members from our breakout room. They were asked to delete the video and refrain from sharing any material not provided directly by the organizers. I recall this incident vividly, as I was unfamiliar with most of the GA's Core and Delivery Team members at the time. I remember questioning whether the GA wasn't meant to be an opportunity for ordinary citizens to challenge and reconsider controversial understandings and worldviews about the climate crisis, debating them in light of other scientific or experiential information.

In the interviews, only Priya, a South Asian seamstress who used to be a children's teacher, presented a more critical view regarding the limitation of assembly members to the information provided by the GA. On the one hand, Priya felt that "whatever was written in there (information booklet) was all correct, and I could easily understand." However, she also believed that "We should think beyond what's written there in the book." Priya's critique aligns with her earlier reflections on the lack of practical connections between much of the booklet's content and her lived reality.

While it's true that misinformation and disinformation about climate change are widespread online and in everyday interactions (cf. Treen et al., 2020), this is the informational landscape we must navigate. Wouldn't fostering critical thinking and encouraging individuals to develop informational autonomy be a more effective strategy for democratic innovations to address citizens' epistemic vulnerabilities—a function I discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis? Despite good intentions, this overprotective form of normative guidance not only created an informational "designed filter bubble" (cf. Bozdag and Van Den Hoven, 2015) but also led many community hosts and even GA facilitators to reinforce the perception that this democratic innovation resembled a "classroom" more than a political process. As I will discuss later, this kind of framing brought undesirable consequences in both normative and learning dimensions.

5.2.2 Personal and bodily conditions for accessing learning materials

Limited resources to study at home

The assembly members were expected to dedicate time before the Breakout Sessions to study or review the Information Booklet provided. This design strategy was important for making the collective discussions of each Breakout Session more effective, particularly at the beginning of the GA journey, where the agenda for debates was directly based on the booklet. Therefore, we questioned our interviewees about their study experiences at home to uncover how their vulnerabilities impacted the process and to chart the response-abilities they employed

to mitigate these challenges. I will present these results with a special focus on the experiences of three assembly members.

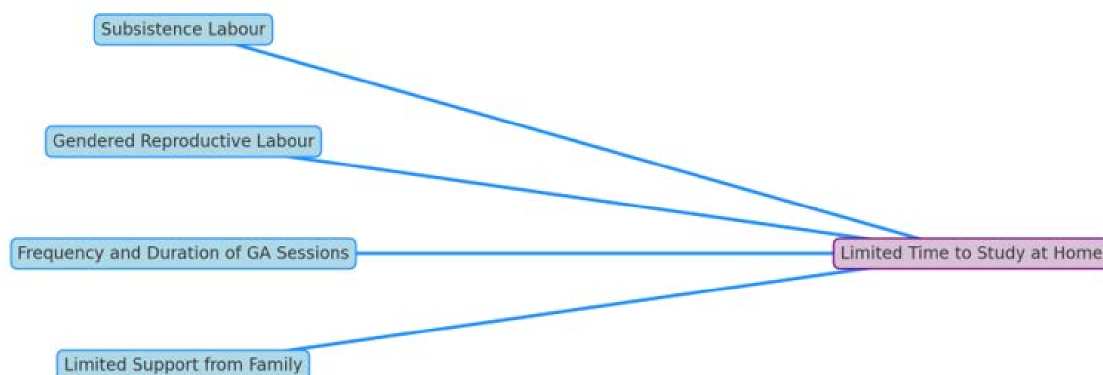

Figure 28: Not accessing additional references or learning sources beyond GA. Source: Author.

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Marta, an elderly woman from Latin America, is retired and lives with her husband in a condo. Considering these social markers in isolation might lead us to assume she had ample free time to study for the GA. However, financial struggles require her to supplement her income by selling handicrafts from home while managing household responsibilities. During the interview, she described her hectic schedule, noting that she faced time constraints when studying at home due to constant interruptions from sales, which kept her perpetually busy: "I'm always selling something, so there's always someone calling me, knocking here at home." In Marta’s case, this is not simply a matter of "time poverty" (Elliot, 2013) due to work demands, but rather an example of how neoliberal contexts have precarized subsistence conditions. Her private life and time have been subjected to work regimes that require constant availability and allow for disruptions without compensation (Standing, 2014, p. 10).

Despite her busy schedule, Marta managed to find some time to study alone in her living room for about an hour: "I studied alone; I was alone, in the living room right here at home. I would put it on the table, mark it, and read it within an hour or so." Given her limited study

time, she relied heavily on her translator for clarifying topics before the Breakout Sessions, rating this support as “In numbers, from 0 to 10, 10!”

For Priya, from South Asia, finding even an hour to study the Information Booklet would have been a luxury. Although she worked as a seamstress at home, like Marta, her reproductive labor included caring for herself, her husband, small children, and other relatives. In addition to economic hardship, Priya had to manage time-intensive domestic duties. Rather than experiencing a “second shift” or the double burden of domestic and paid work (Hochschild, 1989), she endured a “third shift,” fulfilling her civic duties through GA participation. In this sense, her gender role not only constrained her inclusion (e.g., Young, 2001) but also limited her opportunities to reconstruct knowledge and engage in vital democratic experiences.

As discussed in the previous chapter, her already limited study time was further constrained by the GA design, which required her to travel two hours to the community host’s house to participate in three-hour deliberative sessions three to four times a week. Priya’s evenings were the only time she could dedicate to reading GA materials: "I used to read mostly at night-time (…) In the daytime, I did not find time (…) I had to help them with homework, feed my family two times a day, and after washing the dishes at night, then only I used to get some time to read the booklet." Consequently, Priya accessed the Information Booklet only when “I got a chance to read,” relying on collective readings during Breakout Sessions to engage with the complex topics related to the climate and ecological crisis. I will delve deeper into this collective learning process in the next section.

It is important to highlight that other participants relied more heavily on their families to develop response-abilities that mitigated the challenges of accessing learning materials, especially those with lower formal education levels. For instance, Lee, a fisherman who had limited remote support from translators and community hosts, received significant assistance from his son in translating materials. Additionally, according to a community host from Southeastern Africa, Kemba’s father—a teacher—provided invaluable support, helping to reduce Kemba’s “mental laziness” when studying the Information Booklet at home.

On the other hand, family support was not always available to mitigate learning disadvantages. Like Priya, Maria, an elderly cook from Latin America, also struggled to find an hour of spare time to study. As discussed in the previous chapter on the challenges citizens faced when engaging politically in the GA, Maria worked late nights in a restaurant and as a hairdresser in her spare time. This again demonstrates how neoliberalism and her “precarious” work situation (Standing, 2014) impacted the GA’s ability to achieve parity of participation among citizens with different working conditions. Additionally, her daily reproductive labor,

combined with the frequency and duration of GA deliberative sessions, severely limited her time to engage with GA learning materials. She explained, "I didn't spend much time studying (…) No, no (...) because I could take a peek at home with those papers they gave me, but it was not much. I did it more there (in the deliberative sessions). One or another question I would bring (home)."

Unlike Marta, Maria's community host and translator couldn't offer much support in clarifying the Information Booklet, as she was always rushing to attend the Breakout Sessions: "As I said, when I got there with the translator, it was usually just in the time." To develop response-abilities, Maria sought support from social resources available at home. She often mentioned living with a nephew, a history teacher, who was proud of her GA participation. Whenever possible, she asked him questions to help with the learning materials: "Nephew, take a look, give me some tips here (…) But it was just some things that he said to me because he was so busy. Then, just a few things I didn't understand that I asked him." Nevertheless, the person Maria relied on most for learning and clarification was her Breakout Session facilitator, whom she often referred to as her "teacher": "The teacher (facilitator) was a wonderful person, too (…) It was easy when the facilitator talked to us about what was happening and what people were saying. She was understandable. She clarified a lot."

Before concluding, it's important to emphasize that the more our female interviewees were burdened with subsistence and reproductive labor responsibilities, the less time they had to study the learning materials. In other words, they were not only vulnerable in terms of inclusion due to gendered personal demands (e.g., Young, 2000; Elliot, 2013), but they also faced greater challenges in mitigating their epistemic vulnerabilities regarding the climate crisis through the GA. Family support, as we've seen, was one form of response-ability they could employ to mitigate these disadvantages. Another was relying on the valuable exchange of information with Breakout Session facilitators, who helped reduce learning disadvantages for some participants. However, this reliance also created new challenges, particularly when these interactions were rigidly framed and collectively performed as a "classroom."

Paying attention and retaining information

The interviewees explicitly mentioned the intersection of advanced age and lower formal education levels as vulnerabilities that, in interaction with the GA's design and demands, created challenges for them in maintaining attention and retaining information during their intensive and extensive learning journey. This was the case for all our interviewees over sixty years old.

Raj, a retired elderly participant from South Asia, demonstrated in the interview that even some of the events that most affected him during the GA—such as testimonies from individuals whose precarity was intensified by the climate crisis—were difficult for him to retain. Part of this, according to him, was due to his physical condition: "I'm losing memory nowadays as I'm diabetic and taking medicine." However, as he reflected, the frequency and duration of the GA's Breakout Sessions—three hours of engagement at least three times a week for most of the journey—were unfavorable for someone in his condition: "The duration of meetings was too much."

On the other hand, for Marta from Latin America, the average duration and frequency of the breakout rooms did not pose a problem. She specified that the real challenge for someone her age was listening to and retaining information provided by scientific experts, particularly due to their specific ways of presenting information, as we will analyze further in this chapter: "But, the scientists, I don't know, I think it's because of their (scientists') words. There's also my age, right? We forget a lot, right?"

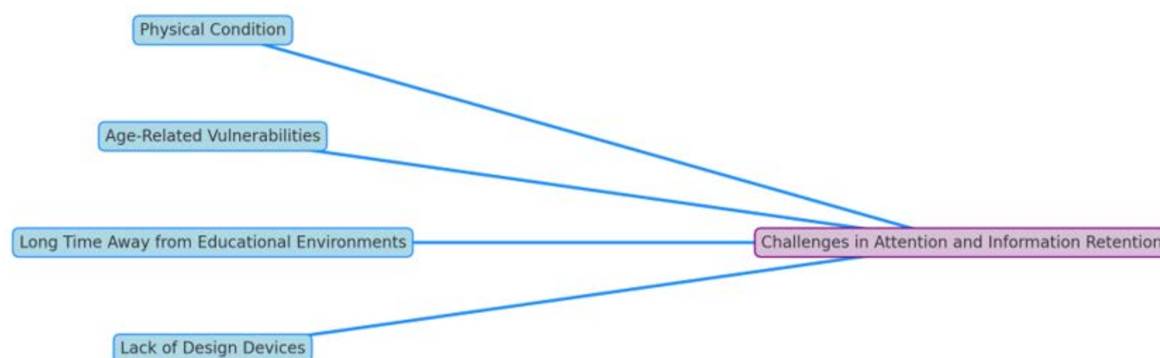

Figure 29 : Challenges in Attention and Information Retention. Source: Author.

For Lee and Maria, memory issues and long-term absence from formal educational environments intensified their difficulties in studying and retaining information during the GA. When Lee was asked about his thoughts on the information provided through the GA's Information Booklet, his initial reflection, beyond appreciating the document's translation into his language, was that "I didn't do my best at school." This reflection emerged in the interview just before he shared his personal experience: "I read the pamphlet they gave me carefully, but I wasn't able to retain the information."

Maria also mentioned in the interviews that she “has a bad memory,” but not just because of her age—“I have a lot on my mind!”—highlighting that individuals with busy lives face additional disadvantages when it comes to retaining information. Moreover, when asked if there was any information from the experts that she found important to remember, she echoed Marta's

difficulty, saying it was much harder for her to retain technical information. On the other hand, she believed that younger people who are currently studying are more likely to pay attention to new and often complex information. This is one of the reasons why she argued that interventions in the climate emergency should begin in schools through education: “I think this information has to come from schools, right? Because if you're studying and know about it, you pay more attention.”

While it’s true that the GA made considerable efforts to create materials and design a learning journey that presented a complex topic like the climate and ecological crisis in an accessible way, as we’ll see below, I couldn’t identify any design strategy specifically aimed at facilitating the long-term retention of the information participants were receiving. This situation placed individuals with greater "intrinsic vulnerabilities," such as memory issues, as described by Mackenzie (2014), at a participatory disadvantage compared to other participants. Still, with more opportunities to “pause,” “rest,” and reflect, these learning experiences might have been more effectively absorbed by participants (Dewey, 1980).

This issue is connected to another problem that emerged during the interviews: just three months after the GA journey, some participants couldn’t recall the content of the GA’s main output—the citizens’ declaration delivered at COP-26. We will address this issue in the next chapter when we discuss the GA’s deliberations.

Nevertheless, most of our interviewees, including Daniela, a hairdresser from Latin America, made a concerted effort to take notes on the learning material and even during the deliberative sessions. This practice was adopted to ensure that the abundance of information would not be forgotten over the three-month period: “I was taking notes, and at the end of the session we would make a reminder of everything we had talked about (…), but I always took note of what we did.” In Maria’s case, it was her translator who suggested the idea of taking notes to enhance information retention.

> (…) they (translator) helped me talk, learn, and calm me down when I was nervous. She always said: "take the paper and write it"; then they always said, "it's great". She had told me to study, and when I had forgotten, she always said, ‘Remember!’. And I had a notebook and a pen to write down and study so I wouldn't forget it the next day (Maria, Latin America assembly member).

As we observed, beyond their functional roles, some community hosts and translators were able to build caring relationships with participants, demonstrating that political care can serve as a response-ability to mitigate epistemic vulnerabilities not fully addressed by democratic innovations. These interactions provided both practical support and emotional encouragement, fostering a sense of trust and psychological safety. Such supportive

relationships often helped participants feel more confident and valued, motivating them to overcome challenges, engage more deeply in the learning process, share their perspectives openly, and participate actively in deliberative interactions—a dynamic supported by specialized literature on education and learning (cf. Bieg et al., 2013).

As we will see in the next chapter, these interactions were crucial in empowering participants and enhancing their overall experience in the GA

5.2.3 GA learning sessions challenges

The first ten GA Breakout Sessions, divided into three thematic blocks and spread across almost the entire month of October 2021, can be considered the learning phase of this democratic innovation. In Block 1, members learned about the current climate and ecological crisis, shared personal experiences, and co-created "conversation principles." In Block 2, they explored future impacts, current governance models, and issues of fairness in addressing the crisis. During the first two sessions of Block 3, they completed supplemental exercises reflecting on the Rights of Mother Earth and engaged with witnesses who elaborated on concepts such as fossil fuels and ecocide. While initial deliberations on propositions for the People's Declaration, intended for submission to COP-26, began in Block 2, they intensified by the middle of Block 3.

Throughout these learning interactions, our interviewees collectively reflected on their ability to mitigate most of their epistemic vulnerabilities and even learning disadvantages that had emerged during the GA process, as discussed in previous sections. Beyond their engagement with experts and witnesses of the climate and ecological crisis, a combination of design and interactional elements, according to the interviewees themselves, transformed the breakout sessions into true "classrooms." The interviewees identified three key experiences in this learning process as vital.

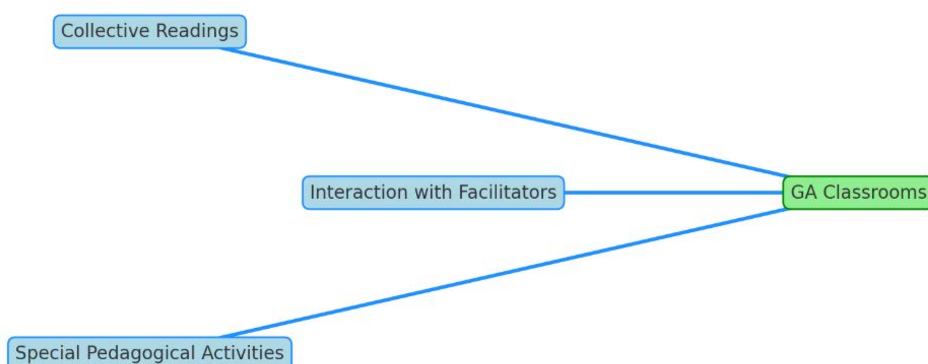

Figure 30: Positive experiences in the GA classroom interactions. Source: Author.

One significant learning experience was the collective readings that took place during the early phases of the GA learning phase. In these sessions, facilitators conducted oral readings of the day's topic from the Information Booklet, allowing time for translators to convey the information to participants. This method ensured that everyone had the opportunity to ask questions or initiate discussions immediately afterward. In Maria's words: "When [the facilitator] read the text, and we responded. And with her asking, and we reading, there, it was easier." Maria also noted the effectiveness of using multimedia during these learning interactions to enhance understanding, recalling, "She put the video, right, then said: 'Tell me what you liked, what you found interesting.'"

Another experience frequently highlighted by the interviewees was the special pedagogical activities that took place. The most commonly cited activity involved participants positioning digital little "dolls" on a timeline board representing their ancestors and future descendants. This board depicted climate and environmental changes over the past decades and projected future impacts in different parts of the world. This learning experience particularly impacted Daniela by connecting abstract data and concepts with her personal life and emotions: "Yes, when they made us go back in time and remember our ancestors. To draw like that, reflective drawings of where we wanted to go, what we wanted to do, those moments were very moving because I live far away from my family, and it made me remember them."

Finally, the most important aspect of the GA "classroom" for the interviewees was the interaction with their facilitators. For many of them, like Chima, this interaction provided the ideal moment to address questions he had noted while studying the Information Booklet alone: "I read and mark areas that I do not understand in the booklet, and during evening discussions, I will ask those questions and further explanation." For Priya, not only was the opportunity to clarify and ask questions significant, but her facilitator's manner and teaching style were particularly memorable: "She was very nice. She used to speak very clearly and beautifully. I loved her teaching style and the way she talked." Additionally, Marta appreciated how the facilitators recognized participants' contributions and incorporated them into the development of the People's Declaration.

> Many times that 'teacher' praised me. Even the woman from the 'course' who asked the questions, the teacher (facilitator), many of the things I said (…) she said she would forward them to the assembly (...) how does she say (...) in the document that we prepared for the COP (...) because they were going to get a little bit of each one for that document they had to deliver (Martha, Latin America assembly member).

As we have observed, the relationship between assembly members and their facilitators was crucial for mitigating learning challenges and asymmetries, both in terms of knowledge acquisition and providing motivational and emotional support. However, the analysis revealed

that certain participatory disadvantages emerged in the GA due to design issues within these learning phase breakout sessions, particularly related to translation.

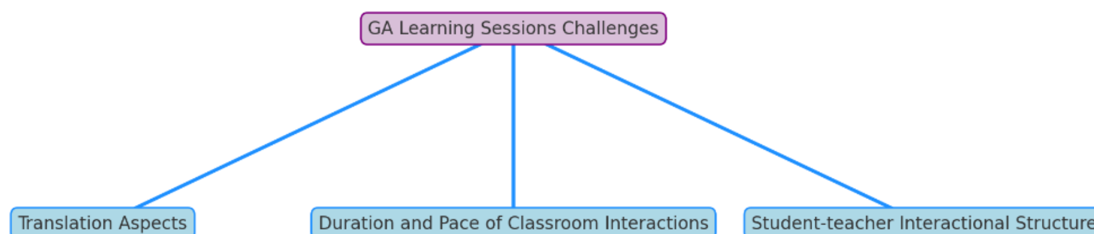

Figure 31: GA learning sessions experiential challenges. Source: Author.

Additionally, these disadvantages were exacerbated by individual vulnerabilities and the interactional roles shaped by the teacher-student dynamic that was prevalent in the GA learning sessions.

Lost in translation

Kemba, the youngest member of the GA, viewed the breakout sessions as a forum for making collective decisions and an opportunity to delve into the complex issues of the climate and ecological crisis. Like other assembly members, he relied heavily on translators to receive information and engage in discussions, as English was the predominant language. During the interviews, Kemba highlighted an issue that this analysis confirmed as a shared experience among other participants: translators faced their own epistemic vulnerabilities while performing their roles, especially when dealing with scientific themes and concepts.

One factor Kemba identified as significant in understanding the challenges faced by his translator was the pace of interactions in the GA breakout sessions. Kemba noted that "they spoke in English and they spoke fast," which posed a significant hurdle for effective translation. His community host, who was present during the sessions with Kemba and his translator, elaborated on the process: "Our translator had first to understand what was being said to pass this message to Kemba then." This process of comprehension and translation had to happen swiftly, given the fast pace of the interactions, as Kemba emphasized.

Furthermore, Kemba's community host pointed out that the situation became even more challenging when the discussions involved complex or abstract concepts. The community host mentioned that "there was a moment when understanding became really difficult, especially when we talked about 'Mother Earth.'" He noted that the concept "was not arriving as it should," creating "a little bit of limitations for our understanding." We have good reasons to believe that

when the translator couldn’t fully grasp the concepts or the purpose of the discussion, participants—most of whom lacked the means to question the quality of the translation they were receiving—were placed at an even greater disadvantage. Again, it seems that achieving an adequate balance between the rhythm and the challenges of the learning experiences, as Dewey (1980) suggests, could have increased the likelihood of these experiences becoming truly memorable.

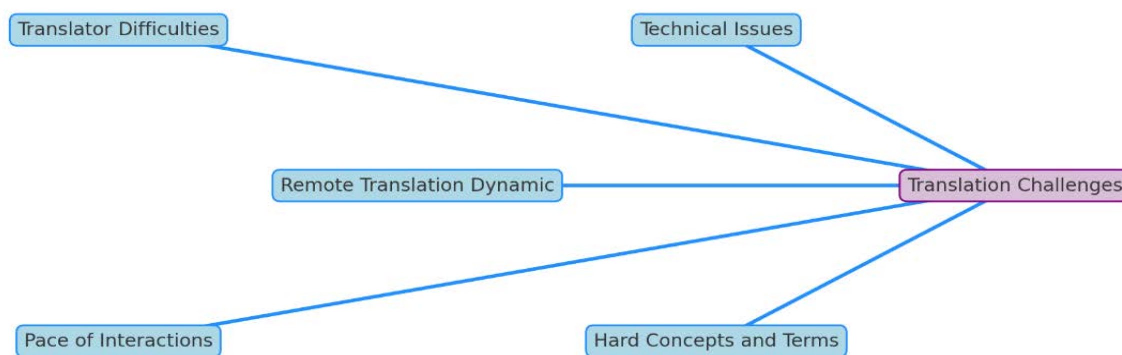

Figure 32: Decomposing experiential challenges and disadvantages in GA learning sessions translation. Source: Author.

Muhammad, an engineer from Western Asia, highlighted the practical challenges faced by translators, particularly the diversity of accents they had to manage, especially from experts. He noted the need for this consideration in the GA design, stating, "Sometimes the experts were American or British, and their accent and language were not easy to understand, especially in live meetings." In the next section, I will focus on the challenges of learning from experts from the perspective of assembly members.

Additionally, we should consider the complications that specifically arose for participants who received remote translations, like Daniela from Latin America: "The most complicated thing was the translations when the internet was down, or I was alone."

On the other hand, other participants confirmed that difficulties with the vocabulary and concepts used in the GA learning sessions were not exclusive to Kemba's team. Jin, a marketing assistant from Eastern Asia, encountered obstacles with the technical jargon: "Some concepts and terms were hard, and I did not understand them." Even Marta from Latin America, who had a highly qualified translator specializing in environmental issues, noted that “some concepts even she didn't understand.” Marta suggested, "maybe if it was something simpler, more objective, from the concept they were explaining."

Finally, the dependency on translators during the learning sessions was problematic for Daniela from Latin America. She expressed that the process of sharing her questions with the

translator, who would then relay them and provide responses, "wasn't the same; it wasn't like being there and interacting with them in the moment in which I didn't understand." As we observed, the reliance on translations made it difficult for her to fully engage in the learning process, hindering her ability to participate in real-time discussions and diminishing the overall effectiveness of her learning experience.

The dynamic of "classroom" interactions

GA facilitators were pivotal figures in presenting and explaining complex material and engaging with the group by proposing or answering questions. Not coincidentally, several of our interviewees, especially those with lower formal education, like Maria, Marta, Chima, and others, referred to them as "teachers." As Maria, the cook from Latin America, made me consider, the use of this term had a concrete justification.

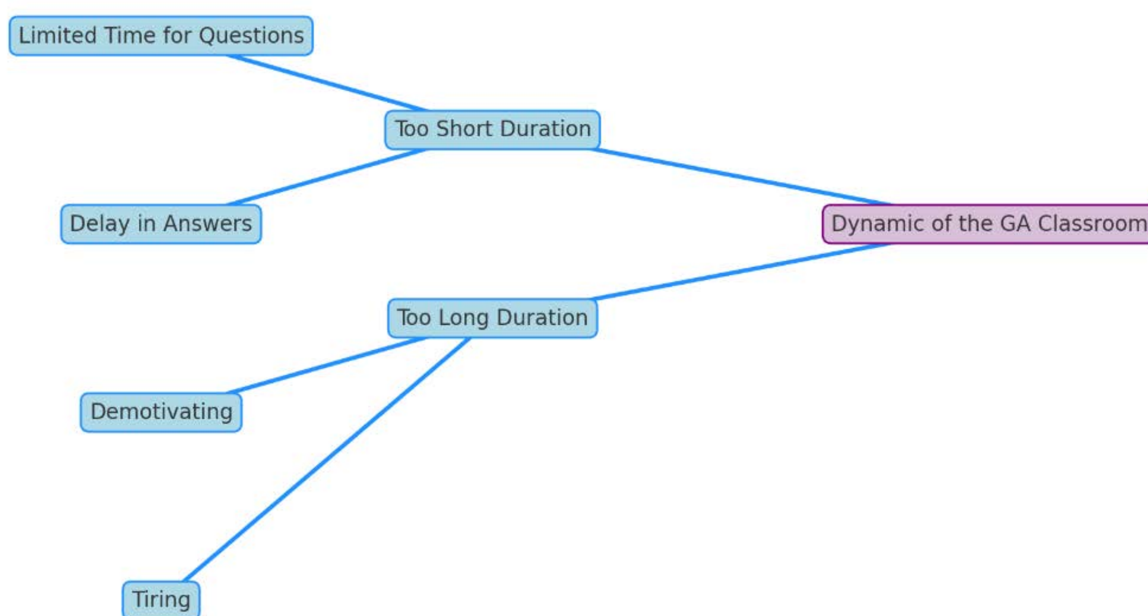

Figure 33: Decomposing experiential challenges in the GA Classroom Interactions. Source: Author.

Maria noted, "In my case, I always questioned what I didn't understand, like solar energy. I had never studied about it. When she spoke there, I asked, and she explained to me." This interactive approach allowed Maria to actively explore new concepts and receive personalized explanations, significantly enhancing her understanding. She elaborated on the impact of this guidance by saying, "Because there's a lot that we don't know, right, I asked what it was like for a vehicle to run on electricity and not on gasoline, right? Then she told me what it was like." As we observed, interactions with the facilitators, or "teachers," were instrumental in broadening Maria's understanding, introducing her to insights and knowledge previously

unfamiliar or difficult to grasp: "Things I learned and didn't know. I just have to say thanks for the classes."

Although the GA "classes" brought important benefits to participants, practical and political dilemmas and drawbacks inevitably emerged when a participatory environment became intensively structured and performed as a classroom.

Regarding practical dimensions, one of the most frequently mentioned challenges in the interviews was the amount of time allocated to the learning dynamics. However, as revealed by the co-occurrence analysis of experiences, different participants experienced the classroom time constraints differently, affecting their ability to engage with and absorb the material presented in these sessions. For Maria, Marta, and Lee—interviewees with more vulnerable sociodemographic markers due to their advanced age, financial constraints, low formal education, and lack of prior knowledge on climate change—the most significant issue with the GA classes was that they were too short and that, at times, the questions posed by their "teachers" were too difficult. Focusing on Lee's perspective sheds light on the specific challenges he faced during the GA sessions.

Lee, a fisherman from Southeast Asia, pointed out two main issues: the brevity of the sessions and the complexity of the questions posed by facilitators. He described the situation, saying, "During the discussion after presenting the videos, we had limited time to answer the questions from the facilitators. Sometimes, the questions were difficult to answer." Lee's struggle was compounded by his limited English fluency, which caused delays in his responses. He noted, "Especially for me, who isn't fluent in English, my answers would be delayed. The others' answers were delayed too." Adding to Lee's challenges, his age further exacerbated his difficulties during the sessions. At 58 years old during the interviews, he acknowledged the additional obstacles his age brought but remained determined to participate actively. He said, "I'm already 58; I can handle it. Even though I get sleepy, I try to stay awake (…) even though it's hard for me to answer some of the questions." However, Lee also demonstrated a proactive approach to participating as effectively as he could: "But when I understand the question, I would answer as quickly as I can." This highlights his eagerness to contribute despite language barriers and time constraints that intensified the session's challenges.

On the other hand, considering different perspectives, I found one participant who felt that the breakout sessions were unnecessarily lengthy. Muhammad, an engineer from the Middle East living in the Global North and one of our interviewees from a more privileged social position, disagreed with the idea that longer breakout sessions would be beneficial. He commented, "I know they try to provide as much information as possible within a compressed

time frame," but emphasized that "motivation decreases as time increases." He suggested that shorter sessions, perhaps "1.5 hours with a 15-minute break," would be ideal, expressing that after "the first hour and a half, I'm exhausted."

While Muhammad's experience may not be generalizable to the most vulnerable assembly members, it prompts us to consider that extending the breakout sessions might not resolve existing issues and could potentially create new ones. Marta and Kemba offer a more pragmatic perspective, suggesting that organizers should employ more multimedia tools and, more importantly, better connect discussion topics and concepts with the concrete lives and challenges of the participants. This approach could enhance engagement and relevance, addressing the learning and participatory barriers identified in the sessions.

Defining a student-teacher interactional situation

Undoubtedly, as we have considered, the facilitators of the Global Assembly played a key role in presenting and clarifying complex topics on the climate emergency for the participants. It is no surprise that they were respectfully referred to as "teachers" by all the assembly members who reported having formal education below the high school level, and even by Priya, who, before working from home as a seamstress, was a preschool teacher. These same assembly members frequently used metaphorical terms like "class," "training," and "course" to describe what the GA meant to them. This was the case, for instance, with Nala, a fifty-year-old vendor from Central Africa, who explained to her clients and family that she would close her street shop to attend a "course on how to preserve nature."

Sociologically (e.g. Goffman, 1974), the design of the GA's breakout sessions provided strong incentives for facilitators and participants to "define[39]" their interactional situation as a "classroom," assuming and performing the roles of "teachers" and "students." However, a more detailed analysis of the breakout rooms would be necessary to understand how this dynamic unfolded comprehensively, which is beyond the scope of this thesis.

On the other hand, in terms of consequences, evidence suggests that this teacher-student relationship within a citizen participation event can compromise not only normative aspects but also learning outcomes and, as I will explore further in the next chapter, the very effectiveness of the democratic deliberation process.

[39] "Presumably, a 'definition of the situation' is almost always to be found, but those who are in the situation do not create this definition (…) all they do is to assess correctly what the situation should be for them and then act accordingly. True, we personally negotiate aspects of all these arrangements under which we live, but often once these are negotiated, we continue on mechanically, as though the matter had always been settled" (Goffman, 1974, p.1-2).

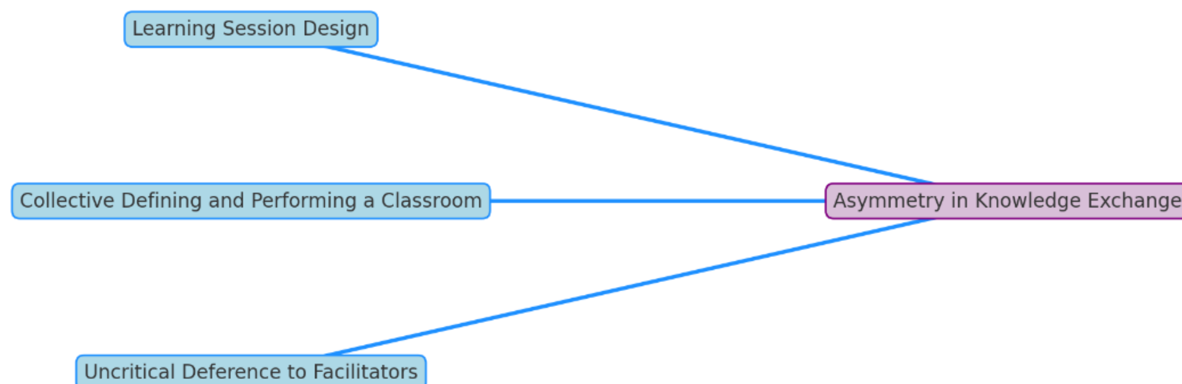

Figure 34: Decomposing experiences of interactional asymmetry in the GA Classroom interactions. Source: Author.

Chima, a farmer from Central Africa, exemplifies the consequences of viewing the Global Assembly through a hierarchical, educational lens. He approached the assembly with full commitment, seeing it as an educational opportunity, stating, "When I started my involvement with Global Assembly, I gave myself time and decided to commit 100% to the Global Assembly Project." Acknowledging his limitations, he relied heavily on the experts and facilitators, appreciating that they "were interested in hearing from us, what we would say, our lived experiences, and they questioned us on a lot of things."

However, Chima's perception of the GA as a classroom created a clear division between teachers and students. He admitted that he saw a gap in understanding and knowledge depth between himself and the experts: "That was the same thing with experts." This perspective led him to place unilateral trust in the experts and facilitators, distancing himself from fellow assembly members. He felt that only the experts could provide the clarity he sought, saying, "I only trusted the response and clarity that I would receive from the experts or our group facilitators."

Chima's uncritical deference to the experts resulted in a rigid separation between expert knowledge and lay perspectives. This dynamic hindered his critical engagement with the content and limited the collaborative potential of interacting with other assembly members. "For me, I knew no one can tell me anything that I could accept whether it was my groupmates or friends," he explained. Chima's experience underscores the need for a balanced approach that values both expert knowledge and participant experiences to foster genuine democratic deliberation.

5.2.4 Learning from scientific experts

More than words, performances

Even though most assembly members could not assess the quality of the translations they received, I was surprised that only one participant directly complained about the overwhelming predominance of English-speaking specialists at the Global Assembly. This was Muhammad, a Middle Eastern engineer, who noted that the accents of the specialists posed challenges for his translator, who often “struggled to understand” what they were saying, “especially in live meetings.” However, instead of proposing changes to the way specialists presented at the Global Assembly or addressing the dominance of the English language, he suggested that translators should “be familiar with multiple accents, such as American, Australian, and British."

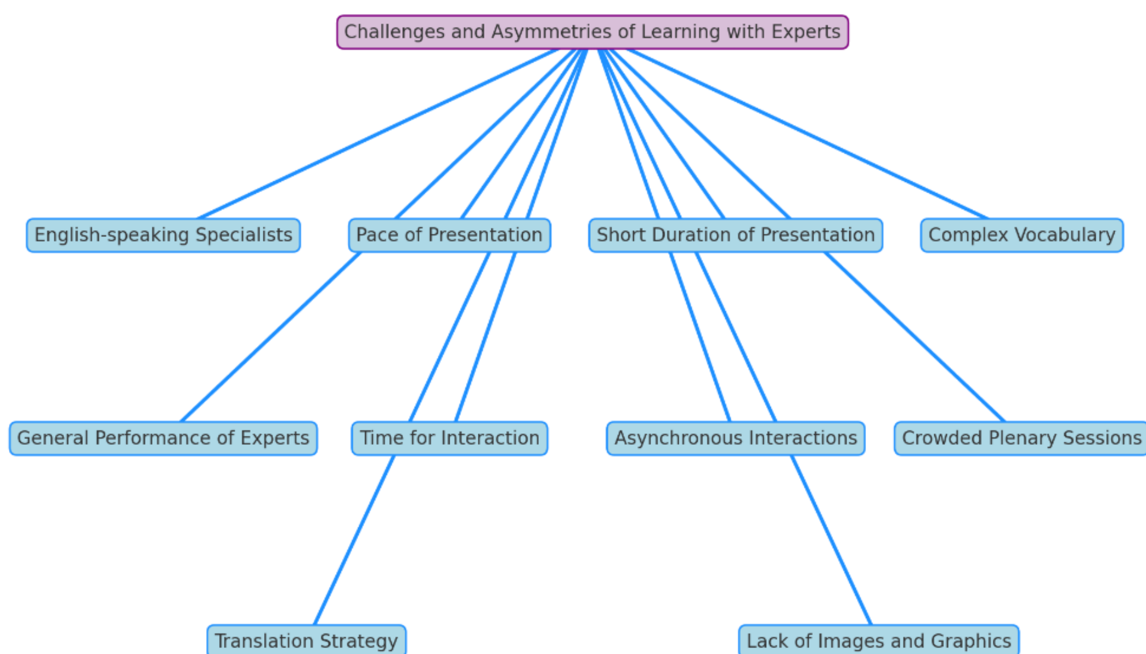

Figure 35: Decomposing experiences of challenges and asymmetries in learning with experts. Source: Author.

Considering the challenges presented by the specialists' presentations, I had previously reflected on the perspective of Kemba, a high school student from Southern Africa. For him, the greatest difficulty was the speed of the presentations. The rapid pace did not allow his translator to fully understand what was being said, making it difficult to adequately convey and explain the information.

Beyond the pace, Daniela, a hairdresser from Latin America, identified both the short duration of the presentations and, especially, the limited time for interaction with the experts as

significant issues. One reason for this was that a substantial portion of the expert testimonies was delivered through recorded videos. On the other hand, when experts presented live, it was typically during plenary sessions attended by all 100 assembly members. Daniela believed that this format did not allow for meaningful citizen engagement with the specialists.

If the assembly members mentioned above helped us consider how, in Dewey's (1980) terms, the excess of resistance and the unbalanced rhythm of interaction with specialists affected their opportunities for learning experiences—making them even more remarkable and vital—another interviewee, Marta, presented a profound reflection on the aesthetic dimension of this engagement, another crucial aspect of vital experiences.

Marta, a retired participant from Latin America, listed several factors that made learning from the specialists tiring and less engaging. She noted that, although the translation she received was good, the predominance of English-speaking experts sometimes made it difficult for her to stay focused: "Maybe it would be better if they were in Portuguese (...) sometimes I was more attentive to how they spoke, then I became more dispersed," she explained. Beyond the language barrier, Marta found the complex vocabulary used by the scientists particularly challenging: "It's harder for us to understand when they start saying things like that (...) they use the most difficult words." Her age compounded this issue, as she noted, "There's also my age, right? We forget a lot, right?" In summary, the technical jargon made it difficult to follow the presentations, causing her to lose track of the content. Additionally, Marta felt that the presentations were often not engaging, as the experts discussed topics that she considered "were usually things that we were already aware of, somehow."

Overall, Marta found that all these factors made some experts' presentations "very tiring." When this occurred, she often focused more on the expert's performance than the content itself, leading to distraction. Marta also believed that the experts' presentation style played a significant role in her disengagement: "I think it's because of the way they talk. At the time, we diverted our thoughts and lost attention."

Marta suggested several improvements to make the sessions more engaging. She proposed that when simultaneous translation is necessary, the translator should be the only one speaking to her, "instead of the translation after each phrase he speaks," and perhaps even "not showing the photo of the scientist." She also recommended using more videos, images, and graphics to illustrate key points, as these visual aids made the content more understandable for her: "Yes, with the image, with the graphics, I could understand."

Uncritical reflection on "teachers"

Raj, a retired participant from South Asia, shared a perspective that highlights both the benefits and drawbacks of his deference to the experts. He stated, "I used to listen carefully to the experts. They were not like us. They were highly experienced, and they talked very nicely. They had lots of books and references. I'm sure they did a lot of research, and that's why they had references. They used to talk big and not like small talk from us. Our talks were very raw." This quote reveals Raj's admiration for the experts' knowledge and presentation skills, which made him more attentive to their talks. He respected their expertise and the substantial research backing their statements, encouraging him to pay close attention.

On the other hand, this deference also had a downside. By viewing the experts as fundamentally different and more knowledgeable, Raj placed himself in a subordinate position, risking an experience similar to Chima's, who only "trusted" what their "teachers" said. Raj's remark that the experts "used to talk big" while his own group's conversations were "very raw" underscores a perceived hierarchy, in which his contributions felt less valuable. This uncritical deference can hinder critical engagement with the experts' presentations, as he perceived their polished, well-referenced discourse as beyond his capacity to question.

5.3 Reconstructing perspectives on the climate and ecological crisis: grounded theoretical propositions

In this chapter, I analyzed how the GA learning journey created transformative and vital experiences for the participants. Additionally, I examined how individual social vulnerabilities interacted with the GA's design and demands, creating challenges and asymmetries that impacted participants' access to information. Now, I will present three key conclusions drawn from this chapter. These conclusions highlight when the GA learning journey was more or less successful and provide normative arguments to improve the design of future events.

First, we should recognize that the GA created democratic conditions for participants to have live, vital learning experiences, including those more vulnerable than others. When we consider democracy not merely as a method of electing and replacing political elites but as a "way of life" (Dewey, 1939), the aim of promoting citizens' epistemic and educational growth by giving them opportunities to engage in collective problem-solving becomes a core value. As I have demonstrated, the GA fulfilled this vision. The research showed that our interviewees significantly enriched their understanding of the climate and ecological crisis, challenged naturalized beliefs, and incorporated scientific hypotheses regarding the causes of certain tragic events in their contexts. Moreover, they became more sensitive to the political dimensions of

these global phenomena, identifying asymmetries in the impacts and responsibilities held by different countries.

On the other hand, the grounded theory analysis helped reconstruct what happened to the interviewees during the GA learning journey and how it happened. Through this, we could recognize that, beyond scientific information, testimonies of precarity presented to interviewees brought to light the lived experiences of those most affected by environmental changes. This promoted a more profound impact, highlighting the intersection of environmental and social justice issues and fostering deeper empathy and awareness among participants. In this sense, the GA demonstrated in practice the importance of creating spaces where injustices and “wrongs” could become visible and affect how individuals, like myself, reconsider the prevalent asymmetric “distributions of precarity” (Butler, 2010) or “partages du sensible” (Rancière, 1995) that marginalize and oppress large portions of living beings.

Nevertheless, the analysis also demonstrated that the GA learning journey was not entirely effective in addressing the questions and doubts our interviewees still have regarding trade-offs and the effectiveness of different lines of action to tackle the complex problem of the climate and ecological crisis. This issue was more pronounced given that they still harbor many uncertainties about the potential for producing profound changes in the energy structures of societies, especially through participatory means like citizens' assemblies. With this, I am not dismissing the possibility that the GA participants we interviewed disagreed with more radical and transformative ways of addressing climate change. Instead, I am questioning whether they fully utilized all the opportunities to explore and consider diverse options and their implications.

Although this research cannot categorically measure how the impact, challenges, and disadvantages in participants’ learning journeys affected their opportunities to develop a more nuanced roadmap of political actions to address climate change, these disparities—whether due to language barriers, time constraints, or lack of prior knowledge—highlight the need for tailored support to ensure equitable learning opportunities for all participants. For instance, a conceptually dense and text-heavy information booklet was not the most effective way to convey complex concepts and data to assembly members who had limited time and struggled to engage autonomously in their study sessions.

Second, the issues arising from the GA’s learning journey were not just about “transmitting” information to people from different backgrounds and cultures but about promoting a more practical and effective “translation,” especially for the most vulnerable.

More than 15 years ago, Graham Smith considered that new developments in TIC would finally create affordable conditions to enable “transnational engagement at larger scales of

governance” (Smith, 2009, p. 152). However, what was interesting in Smith’s reflection was that, for him, not only the asymmetries in accessibility to TIC would be a problem in realizing the democratic good of inclusivity, but also the “differential language proficiencies” that citizens around the world have in English, “the dominant language on the internet” (ibid., p. 153). However, the research revealed that beyond a language proficiency problem, the GA’s learning phase faced a severe problem of “translation” of information.

The linguistic challenges of the GA learning phase were more complex than merely transmitting and decoding messages; they encompassed a broader range of issues. These included difficult vocabulary, dense and unengaging textual materials, and fast-paced, highly technical, and low-interaction scientific presentations. The lack of contextualization and insufficient engagement with participants' diverse backgrounds further complicated the learning process. As John Dewey (1980) reminds us, without this connection, it is challenging for an experience to become transformative or "vital."

In sum, if we define “translation” as “processes of reconstruction, resignification, and interaction that transcend a narrow transmission model between sender and receiver, original and replica” (Capan et al., 2021, p. 3), we can understand that the GA could have been more intentional in translating scientific and political knowledge for the assembly members.

As we observed, families and community hosts helped mitigate some disadvantages that emerged from the interaction of individual vulnerabilities with the GA learning phase design and demands. Nevertheless, improvised and intermittent support is not always effective. Considering participants’ diverse vulnerabilities, multiple strategies for “translating” information must be implemented. Additionally, strategies to support the consolidation of learning and aid long-term memory would be key, especially for individuals whose physical and social conditions put them at a disadvantage in retaining knowledge. Finding a balance between advancing through learning topics and promoting care practices—such as regular check-ins, reviews, and feedback sessions—can help identify where participants are struggling and provide targeted support.

Third, the collective and synchronous learning interactions during the GA Breakout Sessions were the most effective in mitigating challenges and disadvantages in accessing information about the climate and ecological crisis. Still, the political dimension of a citizens’ assembly cannot be overlooked or reduced to an uncritical “classroom” experience.

The experiential analysis employed in this research demonstrated that many factors contributed to the success of GA collective learning. Support from experts, translators, and facilitators was crucial, providing a foundation for participants to engage effectively with

complex topics. The interactions with these "teachers" were significant, as they conveyed information and facilitated meaningful discussions, allowing participants to delve deeper into the subject matter.

Moreover, the pedagogical tools employed by the GA played an essential role in the learning process. For instance, collective readings during the early phases of the GA journey allowed participants to engage with the Information Booklet together, ensuring everyone was on the same page. As one participant noted, the facilitator's oral reading and subsequent discussions made it easier to grasp complex topics. Additionally, multimedia tools, such as images and videos, enhanced understanding by providing visual and auditory stimuli that complemented the textual information.

However, it is important to note that a political process like a citizens' assembly should recognize that information is not something neutrally "transmitted." As I demonstrated, an environment of uncritical deference to expert and scientific knowledge—transmitted by the "teachers" to the "students"—is problematic for any democratic process. I also found evidence of participants valuing the knowledge they received from their "teachers" more than, or even rejecting, information from their peers. How, then, can a learning and educational environment become emancipatory?

Following Paulo Freire (1970), the first step is to avoid reproducing a "banking model" of education where "the best teachers fill them most completely, and the best students are those who most passively allow themselves to be filled" (Shyman, 2011, p. 1039). Similarly, John Dewey criticizes this approach, emphasizing that education should not be a process of "telling" and "being told" but rather a "reconstruction and reorganization of experience," which enhances the meaning of experiences and improves the ability to manage future ones (Dewey, 1916, p. 77).

Adapting Nicole Doerr's (2021) concept of "political translation" as a guiding principle for presenting scientific knowledge in citizens' assemblies would be an opportunity to promote an emancipatory and critical learning environment. She defines the concept as "a set of counter-hegemonic practices triggered by crisis situations and conflicts in culturally diverse group settings or societies which contend with structural inequality and cultural differences" (Doerr, 2021, p. 152). But how could this be implemented?

I believe a "political translation" of scientific concepts in a citizens' assembly environment would encourage participants to question and analyze the information they receive, understand its context and potential biases, and recognize the socio-political implications of different viewpoints. The limits, tensions, and interests within scientific

discourses should be seen as opportunities to develop critical thinking. For instance, understanding the limitations of certain scientific studies or the potential conflicts of interest in research funding can help participants become more discerning consumers of information. This critical engagement is essential for fostering an informed and active citizenry capable of making thoughtful and impactful decisions. Moreover, with this interactional strategy, empowering political dissent could emerge, potentially promoting, as Rancière suggests, “a common polemical scene where they question the objective status of what is given and impose an examination and discussion of those things that were previously invisible or not considered” (Rancière, 2010, p. 125).

6 DELIBERATIVE VITAL EXPERIENCES

Previously, I considered the vital experiences related to our interviewees' primary "impulsion" and justification for their commitment to the GA process: learning about the climate and environmental crisis. However, the analysis of their participatory journeys demonstrated that, beyond learning and expanding perspectives, they were deeply affected and transformed by the interactions they experienced in the GA virtual Breakout Rooms and Plenaries. Moreover, as the interviewees demonstrated, living a deliberative process was not only about producing legitimate political decisions to be conveyed to political decision-making spaces (e.g., Habermas, 1996) or, in the GA's case, co-creating a list of political recommendations representative of the assembly members' beliefs and preferences to be presented at COP-26. It was also about the individual and intersubjective transformations they experienced through engaging in a multi-layered democratic mode of interaction.

In this chapter, I will explore why and how the deliberative interactions experienced by our interviewees during their participatory journey promoted vital experiences with far-reaching consequences beyond the quality and legitimacy of the GA's main output, the People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth (hereafter referred to as the People's Declaration). These deliberative interactions within the GA's democratic environment significantly altered the interviewees' subjective worlds and intersubjective political relationships in ways that some democratic theories regard as essential for fostering vibrant and creative democracies. Examples of these changes include nurturing empathetic reflexivity towards others and their struggles—an important factor in transforming private problems into public ones, as argued by John Dewey (1927)—and fostering a sense of political "competence" or "efficacy," crucial for citizens to support and spread democracy across all spheres of societal life, as theorized by Carole Pateman (1970).

Throughout this chapter, I will further develop the concepts introduced above and others, demonstrating how they emerged as effective instruments to make sense of the conditions and consequences of the vital experiences lived by interviewees during their GA deliberative journey. Nevertheless, from the outset, it is necessary to define what I understand by democratic deliberation, as this is the broader concept encompassing the participatory experiences analyzed here. Following Bächtiger and colleagues (2018, pp. 1–2), I define deliberation as "mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern." Nonetheless, for a deliberative interaction to be democratic, this reflexive mutual communication must occur in interactive

contexts where “equal recognition, respect, reciprocity, and sufficiently equal power for communicative influence” prevail (ibid.).

On the other hand, to make the axial concepts of this thesis (e.g., vital experiences, deliberation, empathetic reflexivity) sensitive to the various constraints and power relations that shape the experiences of the research subjects, this chapter continues to explore how intersections of bodily and sociodemographic vulnerabilities of the assembly members, in interaction with the design and demands of the GA, created an asymmetric distribution of disadvantages and even participatory harms among them.

The chapter begins by presenting the most relevant deliberative experiences narrated by our interviewees during their GA journey. The grounded qualitative analysis revealed two key democratic transformations: nurturing empathetic reflexivity and developing a sense of political competence or efficacy. Beyond the content of speeches and the role of facilitators, the aesthetic dimensions of political deliberation—such as sound, gestures, and the emotions they evoke—were crucial for the emergence of these vital experiences. Additionally, the opportunity to present the People’s Declaration at COP-26 created a democratic environment conducive to these experiences. These elements collectively nurtured empathetic reflexivity, allowing participants to deeply connect with the struggles of others, and a sense of political efficacy, empowering them to believe in their ability to effect change. As I will show, these experiences were crucial in transforming participants' perspectives and behaviors, fostering a deeper understanding of political factors and their impact on climate and ecological crises.

In the following section, the chapter presents and explores the deliberative challenges and disadvantages narrated by interviewees during the GA’s deliberative phase. The interaction between the GA’s design elements, deliberative demands, and the participants' diverse environmental and sociodemographic conditions resulted in distinct and often asymmetric obstacles to engaging in meaningful deliberation. These experiences are divided into three general categories according to their predominant characteristics and constitutive factors: a) Bodily and personal factors, such as educational level, class, and gender-related discursive harms; b) Situational characteristics of deliberation, including the cultural homogeneity of Breakout Rooms and the classroom structure of interactions; c) Accessibility of deliberative resources, such as difficulties with the Miro board software and the lack of feedback on the People’s Declaration.

As in previous chapters, I included diagrams to complement the “analytic stories” of the vital and challenging deliberative experiences presented here. Following the suggestions of Grounded Theory analysts, these diagrams aim to facilitate the presentation of the main

dimensions of the categorized experiences. It is important to highlight that these diagrams do not depict causal relationships but rather illustrate the constitutive characteristics of events and interactional processes, as expressed through qualitative analysis.

6.1 Listening, discussing and co-creating political recommendations

From October 7 to December 18, 2021, 98 participants[40], known as assembly members, engaged in 20 online sessions over 12 weeks, totaling 68 hours. This process culminated in the creation of the People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth (hereafter referred to as the People's Declaration), presented at the United Nations COP26 in Glasgow. The Global Assembly journey was divided into five blocks, each with distinct focuses, evolving from learning and pedagogical activities to more deliberative interactions as the process progressed (Global Assembly Team, 2022, pp. 122–132). I will summarize the process below before delving into the vital deliberative experiences narrated by assembly members in their interviews.

The primary task in the four deliberative sessions that constituted Block 3, from October 21 to 30, was generating inputs for COP-26. During this phase, assembly members interactively consolidated the GA remit question by incorporating prior learnings and new information from additional speakers and witnesses. Finally, they drafted the first version of their COP-26 submission, the People's Declaration. In the final two sessions of Block 3, assembly members approved the framing question and their COP-26 submission by majority vote.

Block 4 was divided into two phases. In the first phase, from November 1 to 12, assembly members observed at least eight hours of COP-26 online and shared reflections. In the second phase, during two deliberative interactions from November 16 to 20, they discussed these reflections, heard from invited speakers, and identified new themes for further exploration. The Process Team crowdsourced these themes and prioritized them for discussion in Block 5.

Finally, in Block 5, which consisted of six deliberative sessions from December 4 to 18, assembly members focused on the top three most popular topics from Block 4: Awareness and Education, Energy Transition, and Monitoring and Enforcement. They conducted iterative reviews of the People's Declaration, generating new clauses and sections. By the end of Block 5, they had completed four iterative reviews and finalized the People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth by majority vote.

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[40] "Out of a planned 100. Of these, 98 remained with the process to the end" (Global Assembly Team, 2022b, p.10).

6.1.1 Listening and nurturing an empathetic reflexivity

Within deliberative democracy literature, the quality of political listening is considered a key factor in any democratic discursive interaction (e.g., Bickford, 1996; Love, 2006; Mutz, 2006). In the last chapter, I demonstrated how listening to scientific experts, witnesses invited by the GA, and participants' testimonies of climate precarity expanded our interviewees' perspectives on the causes and consequences of the climate and ecological crisis. Now, I will consider other vital experiences and the political performative effects of listening to the personal testimonies of fellow assembly members during GA deliberative interactions. In my analysis, one of the most important consequences of these interactional processes is what I call “empathetic reflexivity,” which emerges not only from commonalities but also from differences with others.

Empathy, encompassing both cognitive role-taking and affective feelings of concern for others, is essential for “informing the judgments people make during deliberation” (Morrell, 2010, p. 194). However, as researchers like Scudder (2014) argue, empathy can sometimes pose challenges in deliberation by fostering premature and illusory consensus, undermining genuine discourse and agreement by allowing citizens to assume understanding without truly engaging in dialogue. Yet, my grounded theory revealed a specific kind of empathy experienced by the interviewees, which I term “empathetic reflexivity.” This form of empathy is characterized by prolonged performative effects of political affect, extending even months after a deliberative interaction.

By empathetic reflexivity, I mean the performative impact of a listening experience in which one reflects so deeply and continuously on another person’s life that it fosters a feeling of care for that person, particularly because of the differences and challenges that person evokes. Beyond the positive effects that increased empathetic reflexivity brought to their deliberative interactions—especially when reflecting on sociopolitical differences—it also enabled interviewees to question how their own perspectives, preferences, and behaviors might relate to the lived experiences they were hearing. When this occurs, the relationship an individual once had with someone else, and with a problem they previously thought didn’t affect them, fundamentally changes. For example, a situation of climate precarity that initially seemed to affect only one interlocutor becomes, to some extent, a shared concern. As a result, empathetic reflexivity creates conditions for individuals to care about issues that previously seemed distant, thereby expanding the political significance of these problems.

Nurturing empathetic reflexivity

In the previous chapter, I delved into the role of testimonies in enhancing assembly members' scientific and political learning about the climate and ecological crisis. However, lived experiences narrated during the GA journey also played a crucial role in their deliberative interactions. They sparked a form of empathetic reflexivity that deepened cognitive and emotional connections, influencing participants' deliberative stances and intersubjective relationships with others. The first instance that brought this to my attention was a narrative shared by Marta, a retired assembly member from Latin America, which I will examine next.

As previously discussed, when analyzing the learning experiences of our interviewees, Marta faced significant challenges in retaining scientific information presented to her. However, she vividly remembered the personal stories of individuals grappling with daily hardships, even three months after hearing them at the GA.

During the interview, Marta shared a particularly poignant story from a GA invited witness who was struggling to continue her handicraft work with a specific type of fabric made from a vine. The woman's struggle stemmed from the depletion of the plant species she relied on—a direct consequence of the intense climate and environmental changes occurring in her country. While reconstructing her experience of listening to this narrative during the interview, three months after the GA journey, Marta abruptly posed a question that caught my attention: "What will happen to her? How are they going to do it if (the natural resource) ends?"

In my interpretation, Marta's question demonstrated that listening to this testimony of precarity not only made her more reflective about the causes and effects of the climate crisis but also nurtured an ongoing sense of care for the person whose livelihood was threatened by the loss of the species vital to her handicraft work and conditions of existence. In Marta's words, one factor contributing to her long-term empathetic reflexivity was that these personal testimonies "are more effective in leaving an impression on us" than other discourses, such as scientific ones. But why? In my view, even the democratic qualities of the GA's deliberative environment contributed to this process, as I will discuss in the following sections.

Although I can't say for certain that Marta's empathetic reflexivity toward the invited witness changed the democratic quality of her interactions with other GA participants, her reflection prompted me to investigate whether other interviewees had similar experiences and how these affected their deliberative stances. I discovered that empathetic reflexivity was fostered not only by testimonies of precarity but also by personal accounts that provoked contrast and reflection on different ways of relating to nature.

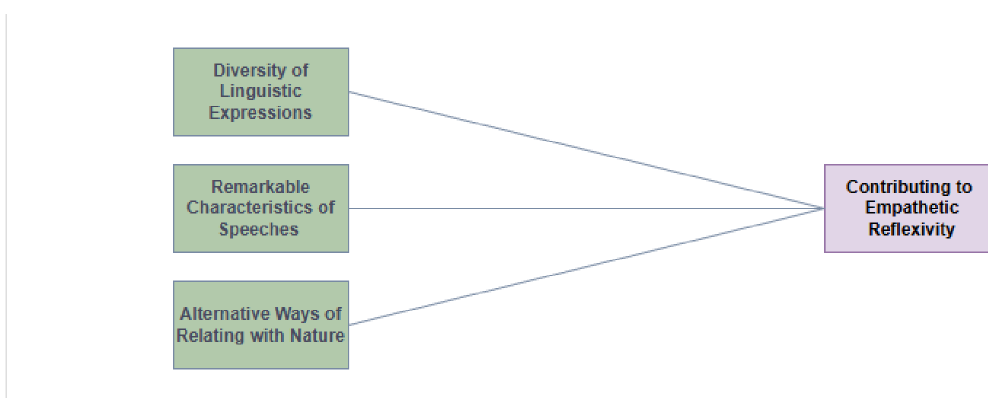

Figure 36: Personal testimonies and empathetic reflexivity. Source: Author.

Let's consider an experience narrated by Carlos, an undergraduate student from Latin America, who described how listening to a North American assembly member in the GA made him reflect and change his perspective regarding the possibilities of caring for the planet.

According to Carlos, he became inspired and influenced by a female fellow assembly member from Los Angeles when she shared her micropolitical actions to address the climate and ecological crisis. Carlos recalled that he couldn't forget when his peer said that, despite being unable to "promote big changes alone," she did not give up on doing something within her reach with the resources she had at hand. For Carlos, when this assembly member narrated her daily small actions and struggles to promote a better environment, such as recycling and reusing items, she demonstrated to him that "small changes would turn into a big change in the end." By listening to and still reflecting on that narrative after three months, Carlos considered that he had become more open and willing to learn about micropolitical environmental actions, defending his new belief that "sometimes we think that if we don't do a big action, it won't do any good, but in truth, it's those small changes that can generate a big change."

Other interviewees provided accounts that more clearly demonstrated how listening to assembly members' testimonies and developing empathetic reflexivity was vital for fostering a positive appreciation of other interlocutors in deliberative interactions.

Raj, an elderly South Asian citizen, affirmed how much he "enjoyed listening to everyone" at the GA and pointed out the interactional effects that this listening had on him. On the one hand, similar to other examples I presented in the last chapter on political learning experiences, by listening to his fellow assembly members narrating their daily struggles, Raj realized that "I am not the only one who is going through problems." Still, this empathetic reflexivity produced effects beyond expanding his perspective on the scale of the climate and ecological crisis. When Raj listened to those "who are poor and do small jobs," speaking eloquently and reflecting on their personal struggles for survival, he nurtured a special sense of care for them and for what they were experiencing. One of the effects of this empathetic

reflexivity was Raj recognizing them, in his words, as “intellectuals,” especially because of the sense of authenticity he felt while listening to his peers.

> There were a few people from India, and they spoke very well. I remember there was a lady who was a farmer, and she was telling me all the problems she was facing. She must have experienced something. That’s why she was speaking so well” (Raj, South Asia assembly member).

Moreover, like Carlos, the effects of Raj's empathetic reflexivity went even further. The interviewee shared how he was especially affected by the narratives of people “doing whatever they can do at their own level” to resist the difficulties they face in their lives, as well as their courage to criticize the government when it was not acting correctly: "They critic the government too for whatever the government is not doing right." By highlighting these aspects, we have good reasons to believe that Raj’s listening experience and empathetic reflexivity made him more sensitive to the daily micropolitics of social life and likely encouraged him to be more vocal about the criticisms he may have of his government.

Finally, one participant demonstrated that listening to testimonies of climate precarity or micropolitical environmental action is not the only way to cultivate empathetic reflexivity toward others. Listening to testimonies from individuals who demonstrate non-traditional ways of relating to nature and other more-than-human entities also seemed to promote an empathetic reflexive stance for this participant—and possibly others.

Priya, a South Asian seamstress, was particularly moved by how other people spoke about ordinary aspects of their everyday lives that differed from hers. She was especially fascinated by how her facilitator and other assembly members who lived in rural areas cared for the animals they lived with, such as cows and buffaloes—something she continued to reflect on even after the GA. In Priya’s words: "I always used to wonder how good they are in looking after their animals, such as cows and buffaloes, so nicely." Listening to these diverse cultural-environmental experiences prompted Priya to reflect on the many ways people can live and establish relationships with nature, fostering a desire in her to learn more about this topic: “It was good to know that people know so many things, but I am not aware of any such things.”

Aesthetic dimensions of discourses and empathetic reflexivity

As I explored above, listening to other assembly members recount their daily struggles or ordinary experiences left a strong impression on our interviewees, leading them to experience an empathetic reflexivity that was key to their deliberative interactions. This reflexivity prompted them to question and potentially change their perspectives, preferences, and

behaviors, while also fostering intersubjective connections with the dramas and problems of others.

Nevertheless, beyond the content of speeches, my qualitative experiential analysis revealed that other aesthetic dimensions of discourse significantly contribute to fostering conditions that nurture empathetic reflexivity toward someone else's ordinary life or struggles. This finding aligns with arguments in the academic literature (Goodin, 2000; Young, 2001; Krause, 2008; Morrell, 2010), yet these dimensions are often overlooked in deliberation analyses and experiments, which tend to prioritize the rationality of arguments and discourse (e.g., Adams, 2014). However, as Dewey (1980) posits, experiences become more vital the more they affect our sensibility and emotions.

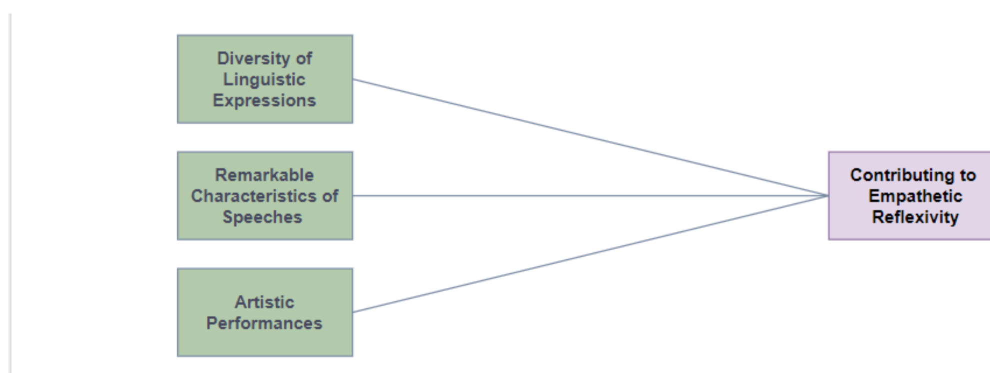

Figure 37: Aesthetic Dimensions of Discourse Contributing to Foster Empathetic Reflexivity. Source: Author.

Listening to the assembly members' diverse linguistic expressions was a remarkable experience for Kemba. As a young high school student from Eastern Africa, Kemba shared that he was “struck by the fact that I heard several different languages.” However, beyond the cultural shock, this experience prompted Kemba to become more sensitive while listening to his peers' differences in phonetics and accents. In this process, he realized that language conveys much more than just a message—it reflects cultural and ethnic identities: "Because each one spoke a local language, one could identify another one there. It's from India, it's from the United States, China." In sum, the aesthetic experience of hearing diverse languages made Kemba more reflective about the phonetic markers in others' speech, enhancing his sensitivity to the cultural and ethnic differences of his fellow assembly members—and likely of others he would encounter in daily interactions.

Among our interviewees, those from Asia seemed particularly affected and reflective about how and why their fellow assembly members' linguistic performances left an impression on them. Jin, a marketing assistant from East Asia, faced many difficulties during the GA's deliberative journey due to the remote translation he received, as I will discuss later in this

chapter. However, he poetically observed that, in the absence of his translator, listening to his fellow assembly members was akin to hearing them “sing” to him. I do not believe Jin was uncritical of the translation problems he faced; rather, he highlighted something we can experience when listening to a song in a foreign language: how the aesthetic dimensions of language can create connections among us despite semantic barriers.

On the other hand, recalling his deliberative experience, Jin shared another discursive factor that contributed to nurturing empathetic reflection for his peers: the performance of some interlocutors who were “very active in expressing themselves” and “straightforward and bold” in presenting their perspectives. Affected by these performances and reflecting on them, Jin realized that he had “learned something I did not have” but wanted to develop in himself in the future—specifically, the communicative skills and confidence demonstrated by his peers during the GA journey.

Yuyan, an undergraduate student from South Asia, recalled a memorable interaction with a fellow assembly member during the interview. Despite not remembering the content of what was expressed, Yuyan vividly recalled a female Indian assembly member's open-mindedness, enthusiasm, and active engagement in expressing herself. This female peer was particularly special to her because "she always made us laugh." Yuyan's account highlights how this participant's vibrant personality and communicative skills created a positive discursive atmosphere for herself and the group—an element of utmost importance to democratic deliberation.

Recounting another experience she had in the GA, Yuyan claimed that listening to other assembly members not only made her more sensitive to the cultural and ethnic differences of others, as in Kemba’s case, but also deepened her appreciation for her own culture. During one of the weekend plenaries—"our last, or maybe the second last"—a senior student from her country gave a speech that was especially memorable to her. Her fellow countryman made her proud because he “introduced the opinions of our country participants” and “introduced our country music,” likely through an artistic performance that positively represented their culture in front of all the assembly members from Yuyan's perspective.

While analyzing the aesthetic dimension of GA interactions, I recalled a remarkable experience from my role as a deliberative notetaker. The occasion was the final plenary session of the GA, the “Celebration Closing Party.” Before this event, each breakout group prepared multimedia presentations and performances to represent how the GA journey had impacted their lives. Following the order of breakout groups from 1 to 20, the assembly members showcased colorful slideshows, recorded testimonials, pictures of their environments,

traditional music, and dances. They even performed with fruits representing their countries to artistically express the meaning and connection the GA learning journey had for them.

Figure 38: Artistic performances in the Global Assembly. Source: Author.

That collective artistic performance deeply moved those present, as it marked the final meeting of an intensive three-month participatory journey. Nonetheless, the ceremony was remarkable because it was the only opportunity I had to step back from my role as a citizen assembly notetaker and listen to how the GA journey had impacted the assembly members through the language they felt was most effective for conveying their emotions. In this sense, the ceremony destabilized the naturalized distribution of bodies and roles prevalent in the GA, creating opportunities for assembly members to experiment with new ways of appearing and expressing their voices in that digital political space, as Rancière (1995) might help us interpret.

The images below are screenshots I took during that special final plenary of the GA. I continue to reflect on that occasion, wondering what vital experiences—and even changes in the People's Declaration—could have occurred if other moments of “artistic disruption” within the regular deliberative process had taken place or if such practices had been more frequently used as tools for democratic deliberation

6.1.2 Experiencing a democratic exchange of perspectives

Experiencing inclusion and respect

As Bächtiger and colleagues (2018, p.4) identified, certain values have become more crystallized as ideals for judging good deliberation despite ongoing debates and challenges. These include inclusion, mutual respect, equal communicative freedom, and equal opportunity for influence. Additionally, the goal of deliberation is not solely to achieve consensus but also to clarify conflicts. The orientation towards the common good remains crucial, yet it is now recognized that self-interest, when constrained by fairness, also has a legitimate role. Publicity, once considered universally necessary, is now seen as essential in many circumstances but not all, such as in negotiations where representatives can be trusted. Finally, accountability remains fundamental—whether to constituents in the case of elected representatives or to other participants and citizens in non-elected contexts.

Assessing the extent to which the GA's design effectively realized all the ideals mentioned above is not within the scope of this thesis. However, the grounded theory methodology revealed that these democratic values are far from abstract. For the interviewees, experiencing these values enacted in political interactions was transformative, leaving vivid impressions that will likely influence how they understand and appreciate the "democratic method," as Dewey (1939a) would put it.

For Carlos, one factor that explains the success of the GA was that the Breakout Sessions had an ideal number of participants. With an average of five assembly members, "everyone could participate, and no one was left without speaking." Conversely, from Carlos's perspective, "if the group (...) had been a little bit bigger, there wouldn't have been enough time for everybody to participate."

On the other hand, most interviewees highlighted that beyond the number of participants, other design characteristics of the Breakout Rooms were more relevant in promoting the democratic inclusion and sense of discursive respect they experienced during their GA journey.

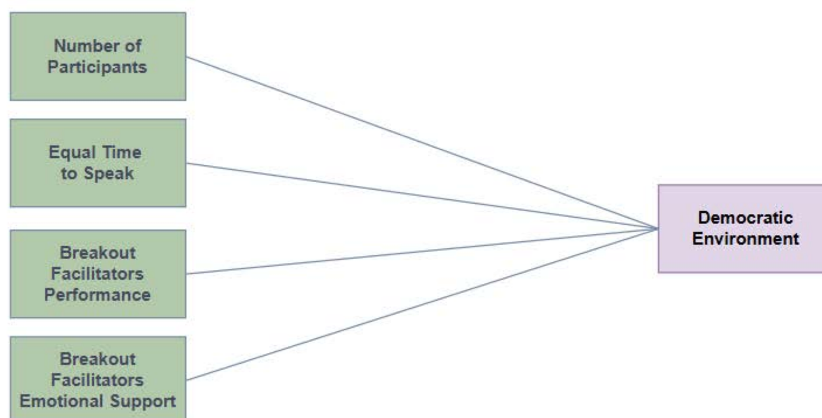

Figure 39: Deliberative Design Fostering a Democratic Environment. Source: Author.

One design factor the interviewees mentioned as relevant for promoting a democratic deliberative environment was the opportunity and amount of time they had to speak. Chima, a farmer from Central Africa, considered that “the dynamic of the deliberative sessions was good” because each assembly member could “speak with plenty of time.” This was also the case for Daniela from Latin America. In her experience, having equal opportunities and time to speak not only made her feel included but also respected as a valuable interlocutor: “There was always respect, we all had the right to speak, we all had a moment to interact, a moment to talk, and that was very respected.” Similarly, Jin from East Asia described the experience of evenly distributed speaking turns as one grounded in “respect”: “In our breakout session, we respected each other. I let others speak first, and they let me speak first, too. I felt very equal.”

Most interviewees understood that one of the key conditions for successfully realizing an ideal distribution of speaking opportunities and time in the GA deliberative interactions was the performance of the Breakout Facilitators. Muhammad, an engineer from Western Asia, attested to this in practice: "The facilitator's role was positive as well, as they distributed the time properly among the participants." Priya, a seamstress from South Asia, also highlighted that all participants in her Breakout Room had an equal chance to speak thanks to her facilitator, who “coordinated the sessions well and gave everyone a chance to speak equally. She had already told us everyone would get a chance equally, and we had to work as a team. She was monitoring it very well."

Nevertheless, beyond simply distributing and managing speaking time, the interviewees emphasized that another important aspect of the facilitators' performance was actively encouraging the participation of those who were hesitant to speak. This was crucial for Carlos to feel included, especially when he didn’t understand something: “They would repeat it or even encourage me to collaborate,” he noted. For Yuyan, who had never experienced a deliberative

interaction before, her facilitator played a key role in keeping her engaged by "actively asking me to express myself and helping me to fit in." Similarly, Priya felt motivated and confident when her facilitator encouraged her to speak directly and provided positive feedback, including through body language: "(The facilitator) used to smile at my talk, and she used to like and praise me for what I was saying there. When I talked about my village and what I do there, she was happy," Priya recalled.

Meaningful exchanging of perspectives and dissenting

In the early stages of deliberative democracy theory, the pursuit of consensus was often seen as a central ideal, which, in many cases, seemed to suppress or silence social conflicts. Critics such as Lynn Sanders (1997) and Chantal Mouffe (2000) argued that this emphasis on consensus favored rational forms of discourse that excluded marginalized groups, such as women, racial minorities, and the poor, whose speech cultures differ from the rationalist forms privileged in academic debates and parliamentary procedures. However, deliberative theory has evolved, and scholars have recognized the importance of addressing differences and disagreements in a democratic environment. Today, deliberative democracy values the plurality of speech cultures and the ability to clarify conflicts rather than merely seeking consensus (Dryzek & Niemeyer, 2006; Mendonça, 2009b; Curato, 2013). This shift reflects a broader understanding that deliberation should not only aim for consensus but also promote the mutual exchange of reasons and the recognition of differences, thereby enriching the inclusive character of the deliberative system.

But how were consent, understandings, and dissent experienced by our sample of intensively diverse assembly members worldwide, who deliberated in the GA for more than three months?

Despite a few exceptions, which will be discussed when I present experiences of disadvantage narrated by interviewees, most considered their discursive interactions in the GA Breakout Rooms democratic. But what was remarkable for them in exchanging perspectives and debating topics related to the climate and ecological crisis that made them feel this way?

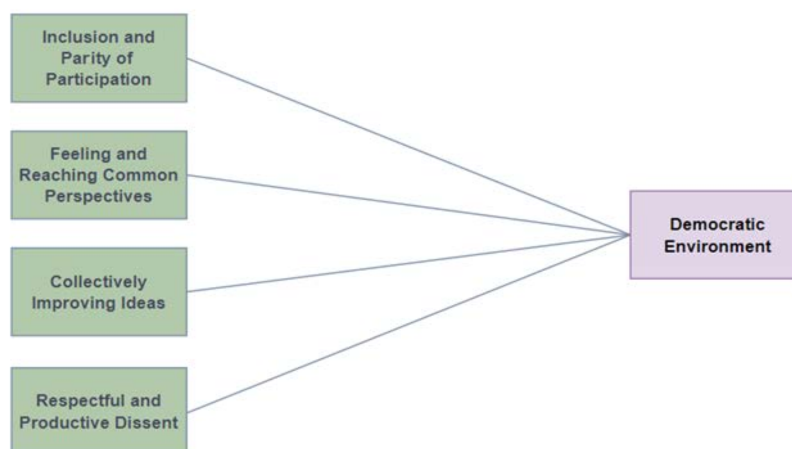

Figure 40: Deliberative Interactions Fostering a Democratic Environment. Source: Author.

An important factor that contributed to the interviewees describing the interactions in the GA Breakout Rooms as democratic was the perception that social asymmetries among participants didn't interfere with their ability to present viewpoints and propositions to the group. This was the case for Raj, a retired participant from South Asia. As mentioned earlier, Raj was struck when he "saw people who were there were not literate" having the opportunity to "talk very nicely about the environment." He noted that this left him "surprised," indicating that the GA's inclusive discursive environment differed from what he typically experienced or conceived as political interaction.

Another situation narrated by the interviewees that positively impacted their perspectives was realizing that, despite many social and cultural differences, they shared and/or could reach common viewpoints on different debate topics. Consider the case of Yuyan, an undergraduate student from Eastern Asia. With the help of the facilitator and translator, she could express her opinions to others and learn from her peers. Nonetheless, what was remarkable to her was feeling, during the discussions, that "we are not far away from each other, although we are far away (…) But we are close to each other, and our opinions are similar." Similarly, Jin, a marketing assistant from Eastern Asia, reflected that despite different cultures and languages, "through translation, I found that we are close in opinions. So, I feel that people from different places have a lot of similarities."

When evaluating the deliberative disadvantages that the GA design promoted, I will consider whether the perception of sharing a high degree of common viewpoints with fellow participants, as narrated by Yuyan, Jin, and other interviewees from Asia, should be interpreted as a result of the low cultural heterogeneity of their Breakout Rooms.

For Kemba, a high school student from Southern Africa, the opportunity to speak, be heard by others from diverse cultures, and discover that he shared similar opinions on climate crisis issues was important. Still, co-constructing “solutions” to address the climate and ecological crisis during the deliberative sessions was especially significant for him. Enthusiastically, he explained how he engaged during interactions with his peers: “So, look, I would look for a solution, and my colleague would put his solution, and I would stop to analyze my solution and his solution." If the “solution” proposed by himself or others wasn’t clear or convincing, he wasn’t afraid to ask or answer questions, viewing these as opportunities to reflect and find common ground: "When I would ask my colleagues a question, I would also try to know, try to understand the question.”

Pursuing collective solutions through exchanging perspectives and questions also positively affected other interviewees. Lee, a fisherman from Southeast Asia, argued that discussing the changes he and his fellow assembly members hoped to implement in the world to address the climate crisis—"what needs to be done and what needs to be stopped"—was vital not only to co-create the People’s Declaration, the main output of the GA. For Lee, this interactional process also deepened his connection with fellow assembly members: “We got along because we were all talking about the changes we hope to be implemented,” he shared. Similarly, Jin reflected that when he and his peers debated possible solutions to the environmental emergency, they felt connected because they experienced a collective hope that motivated them to continue working together: “Everyone was expressing themselves. Everyone was hoping that our environment could be better, there could be fewer disasters, and people could have better lives. This is the most memorable for me,” he said.

During the interviews, we also asked participants if and how they processed dissent and disagreement in the GA deliberative interactions. Only three Asian participants believed that no dissent occurred during the GA deliberative sessions, as I will explore in the next section. Nevertheless, discursive dissenting experiences seemed more impactful to some interviewees than others.

For Maria, the elderly cook from Latin America, what stood out in experiences of dissent in her GA Breakout Room was the structured and respectful manner in which they were presented and encouraged. Maria recalled that her facilitator actively encouraged attendees to consider whether everyone agreed with the viewpoints and propositions expressed in the breakout rooms: “When we spoke, the facilitator asked, ‘Do you disagree with Ms. Maria?’ Then the person would say, ‘I agree!’ Then he made the cool gesture, right? But some things

were not acceptable, right? Then the person would say, 'Ah, I think like this,' or 'I think otherwise.'"

Besides recalling the encouragement she received to use non-verbal language to demonstrate agreement and connection with the presented viewpoints, Maria comfortably reflected on how she reacted when a fellow assembly member disagreed with her perspective. She noted, "It was all in there, all in between (the deliberative setting). Certain things I said, the people told me they agreed or not. No problem," she reflected.

As I considered earlier, questioning and being questioned by others during the GA was a vital experience for Kemba, particularly because he saw this process as an opportunity to improve his ideas and convictions. During the interview, Kemba described how the process of considering others' proposals unfolded in the GA: "It's like, it was my turn, and they put a certain topic, and it was for each one to explain, to have an idea about that topic. Then each participant would look at my idea and then come back." Kemba found this process especially important when someone pointed out that "I have 'imbalanced' a little bit" because "he would put my idea on the 'ruler.'"

Finally, the interactive environment of the Breakout Sessions—characterized by democratic qualities such as inclusivity, parity of participation, respect, and even discursive solidarity—proved crucial in processing (apparently rare) intense moments of dissent among the participants. While analyzing the interviews, I found only one such moment, but this singular case provided important qualitative insights.

When asked if she experienced moments of dissent during the GA, Marta, a retired participant from Latin America, shared an episode that occurred while she was debating the relationship between the consumption of animal products, like meat, and its connection to the climate and environmental crisis. During a conversation about cattle raising and deforestation, Marta expressed her opinion that, despite being "against the killing of living beings, (…) everyone likes to eat meat," including herself. Consequently, she argued in the deliberative interactions that the problem "would never end."

In response to Marta's perspective, one of the more active assembly members in her Breakout Room, Salomon from North America, not only disagreed with Marta but also pointed out a contradiction in her thinking, stating, according to the interviewee: "How can you be in favor of eating meat and against killing living beings?" While reconstructing this scene during the interview, Marta shared her discomfort when Salomon highlighted this apparent contradiction: "I felt pressed; how would I respond?"

As Marta struggled to formulate a response, another fellow assembly member noticed her difficulty and came to her aid. This participant helped her craft an answer that she judged not only as satisfactory to respond to Salomon but also contributed to her reconsideration of the trade-off between meat consumption and its environmental consequences: “Then another participant helped me, saying that we don't need to stop all at once and that we can decrease, changing little by little.”

In sum, despite the discomfort, the debate and dissent that Marta experienced were positively processed, thanks to the democratic environment of the discussion and the solidarity of her peers. Consequently, Marta had the opportunity to reconsider her perspective on the complex relationship between a large-scale environmental problem and her daily habits.

Experiencing a democratic exchange of perspectives means engaging in open dialogue and receiving support from peers, which helps individuals reconsider and refine their viewpoints. This process is crucial because it allows people to navigate complex issues and make more informed decisions, as seen in Marta’s experience of re-evaluating her habits and environmental impact with the support of her fellow assembly members.

6.1.3 Co-creating and delivering political recommendations

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis, Smith's (2009) well-known concept of democratic innovation focuses on producing effective changes in public policies and decision-making processes. However, despite recent advancements in this regard, mini-publics and citizens' assemblies continue to face many challenges in addressing their decision-making vulnerabilities within democratic systems (e.g., Pogrebinschi and Ryan, 2018).

Nonetheless, what Grounded Theory revealed is that our interviewees, in addition to having high expectations regarding the impact of their participation in climate governance—expectations that unfortunately led to some frustrations, as we will explore later in this chapter—also experienced transformative vital experiences, particularly related to the creation of the People's Declaration, which was presented at COP-26.

The People's Declaration is a comprehensive document created by the Global Assembly (GA) to address the climate crisis and promote sustainable development. It represents the collective voice of diverse citizens worldwide who participated in a 68-hour deliberative journey. These assembly members engaged in structured learning and discussions, received expert briefings, and collaborated in drafting this important document.

The final version of the Declaration is organized into several key sections, each addressing critical aspects of climate governance and sustainability. These sections include

affirming and enforcing the Paris Agreement, emphasizing the need for equity through the distribution of responsibilities based on countries' capabilities and historical contributions, and advocating for participatory decision-making processes that include the voices of those least responsible for and most affected by the climate crisis. It also calls for the inclusion of the right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and emphasizes protecting Nature's intrinsic values and rights through legal measures against ecocide.

Additionally, the Declaration highlights the necessity of integrating climate education into formal school curricula and governmental communications, as well as disseminating information through accessible platforms like social media. It also stresses the importance of ensuring a fair and just energy transition by supporting countries and communities with fewer resources and recognizing shared responsibilities among citizens, governments, and corporations.

As previously mentioned, the People's Declaration was delivered and read at COP-26, presented as a testament to the collective voice and concerns of the global citizenry. The final version (v2.0) of the People's Declaration was approved on December 18, 2021, and, as far as I know, is only available in English on the GA website—a situation that may be related to accessibility issues, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth

All of our interviewees, even those who couldn't recall the precise content of the People's Declaration three months after its co-production, affirmed that this document represented them. Beyond legitimizing the GA's political output, the process of co-constructing and delivering the People's Declaration was remarkable for most interviewees because it: a) objectively demonstrated a recognition of their perspectives, b) fostered their political self-esteem, and c) made them feel included and heard in an international arena they had never dreamed of being part of—COP-26.

Marta, the retired participant from Latin America, was one assembly member who felt especially marked by the process of constructing the People's Declaration. When sharing her experience during the interview, she recalled that one of the notable features of the declaration was that it was formed by "a little bit of each one" of the participants who contributed to its creation. Moreover, what affected her the most was when the "teacher," her facilitator, "praised her" and said that "she would forward them (her propositions) to the document that we prepared for the COP."

The participatory process of learning, debating, and having one's viewpoint considered and incorporated into the People's Declaration remains vividly in the participants' memories. Chima, the subsistence farmer from Central Africa, does not forget the experience of "coming up with many suggestions" during the sessions for building collective recommendations and, subsequently, seeing that "my suggestions were part of the People's Declaration." For him, the objective existence of the People's Declaration was not only about "showing our work being considered" but also contributed to changing how he viewed himself politically: "My exact words and ideas were being considered. I told myself, 'I was the one who stated that.' It gave me so much joy."

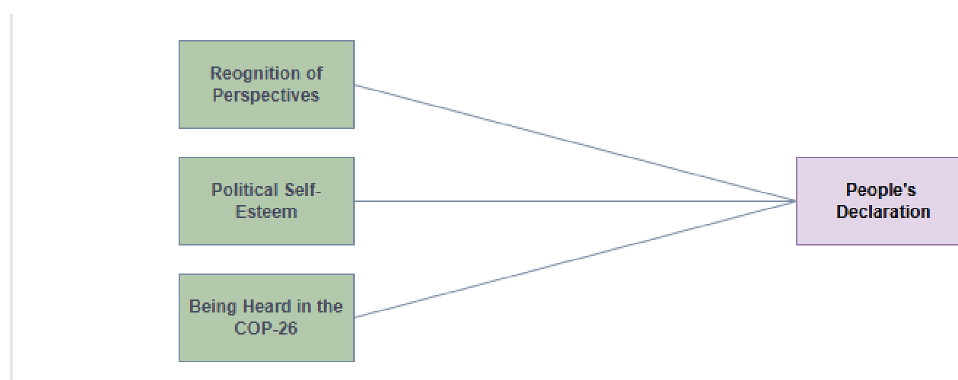

Figure 41: Marking experiences related to the Peoples Declaration. Source: Author.

On the one hand, most interviewees felt that their ideas and even specific words were adequately represented in the People's Declaration, which was crucial in fostering a sense of recognition for each individual's contributions during the participatory process. On the other hand, for participants who did not feel completely reflected in the People's Declaration, the experience of democratically constructing this political document led them to reflect and recognize that the GA didn't need to perfectly mirror their perspectives and proposals for the document to be representative and legitimate. In this sense, they internalized an important normative commitment to democratic diversity.

One of the interviewees who exemplified this process was Jin, an undergraduate student from Latin America. For Jin, the fact that "80% of my views are embodied in the statement" was sufficient to consider the document legitimate and representative because it demonstrated that "they listened to us in different ways," meaning the process could accommodate the diversity of thoughts and worldviews of the assembly members.

Similarly, Yuyan, an undergraduate student from Eastern Asia, considered that "70% of my views are embodied in the statement." This was not a problem for her because she realized during her democratic journey in the GA that "people have different ideas, and we cannot force others to accept 100% of our own opinions." For Yuyan, "We obey the majority rule, so I am

happy to accept others' opinions, and I am happy that my opinions can be accepted." In this sense, the democratic construction of the People's Declaration helped Yuyan understand why compromising some of her convictions is important to accommodate others' different views: "70% is already great, considering we have so many participants from so many different countries. I think 70% is great."

Delivering political recommendations at the COP-26

As discussed in Chapter Two, John Dewey (1980) argues that for an ordinary experience to be truly significant, transformative, and vital, it must reach an adequate fulfillment that provides a satisfying closure to a journey. For some of the interviewees, the experience of feeling recognized for their participatory efforts and contributions to the People's Declaration was only fully realized when the document was presented and read at the COP-26 event. Your paragraph is already strong, but here's a slight refinement for clarity and conciseness while preserving your original meaning:

This was the case for Daniela, a hairdresser from Latin America, who felt she only "realized that what we said (in the breakout sessions) was respected" at "the moment of reading the declaration" at COP-26. The same was true for Marta, an elderly participant from Latin America, who shared that what "makes me proudest is that one or two of my words went in that document (…) knowing that a word of mine is there, being read by people worldwide."

Additionally, for Carlos, an undergraduate student from Latin America, it was important to celebrate that "every opinion of all of us who were there went into the document." However, what truly marked him was seeing the People's Declaration delivered and read at COP-26. In his words, this moment demonstrated that "things didn't just stay in meetings and words, but that we could contribute even just a little bit to try to slow down climate change and help the world a little bit."

Like Carlos, other participants found the COP-26 presentation particularly significant because it reinforced their belief that the People's Declaration could have an impact on global climate governance.

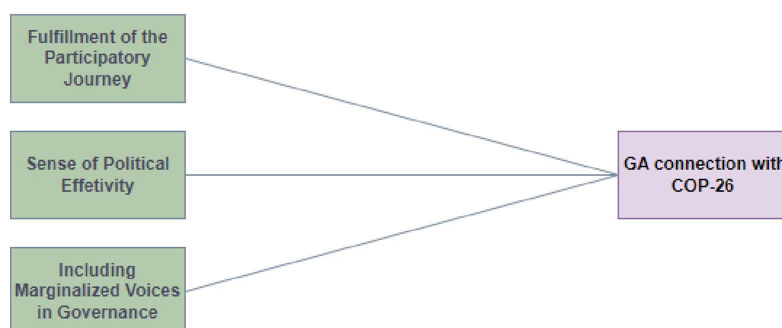

Figure 42: Marking experiences related to the GA COP-26 connection. Source: Author.

Let's consider Raj's experience, a retired participant from South Asia, who consistently expressed a positive assessment of his GA journey. He highlighted how the process not only included him but also demonstrated that ordinary people can speak as "intellectuals" about the climate and environmental emergency. Unsurprisingly, Raj showed great satisfaction with the People's Declaration being presented at COP-26, noting that it was created by "those people who have faced the consequences of this climate change" and that, therefore, "whatever points which were raised there, if they are implemented, then it will make a major impact." In other words, Raj believes that if implemented, any proposal from the People's Declaration will significantly influence current climate governance, precisely because it was crafted by individuals deeply affected by this transnational issue.

On the other hand, Amina, an assembly member from Western Asia who works with NGOs, felt accomplished because "we made it to COP26, and we were able to talk about the issue directly." For her, the most significant aspect of presenting and reading the People's Declaration at COP-26 was publicly demonstrating that ordinary people who "suffered from climate change," through a democratic participation process like the GA, are not entirely dependent on "experts to talk about it." According to Amina, addressing a collective problem like the climate and ecological crisis requires "people with lived experiences (…) talking about something global" that can unite "us all together around the world."

As I have shown, interviewees felt that delivering, reading, and being heard at COP-26 contributed to their recognition as co-constructors of a list of political principles and recommendations. This process played a key role in nurturing their sense of political efficacy. Carole Pateman defines political efficacy as the belief that individual political action can influence the political process, making civic participation feel meaningful (Pateman, 1970, p.53; 105). This is crucial not only for helping people recognize their capacity to engage in democratic problem-solving but also for fostering appreciation for democratic methods of political engagement, making them less susceptible to authoritarian decision-making. At the

end of this chapter and in the next, I will explore how these intersubjective political transformations during the GA journey influenced participants' everyday political behavior.

6.2 Challenges, disadvantages, and response-abilities in the deliberative journey

As presented, the grounded theory qualitative analysis of the interviews conducted in this thesis identified three main groups of vital experiences related to the GA deliberative interactions.

First, when assembly members listened to personal testimonies from their peers—detailing struggles, response-abilities, or different ways of relating to the environment—many developed a distinct form of empathetic reflexivity toward others and their problems. When this empathetic reflexivity was present in their narratives, it often corresponded with changes in mindset, behavior, and/or the establishment of caring relationships with issues they previously felt unaffected by.

Second, this empathetic reflexivity, combined with experiences of exchanging perspectives in an environment characterized by key democratic qualities, fostered feelings of inclusion, respect, and recognition among interviewees. These experiences not only elevated their political self-esteem but also justified their attribution of legitimacy to the democratic innovation they participated in.

Finally, the process of co-constructing—and, more importantly, presenting—the People's Declaration at COP-26 enabled participants to nurture significant dimensions of what Carole Pateman defines as the sentiment of "political efficacy." As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, this achievement transformed how interviewees engage politically with climate and environmental issues in their daily lives after the GA.

On the other hand, the experiential analysis also revealed how the interaction between participants' bodily vulnerabilities, their sociodemographic characteristics, and the GA's deliberative design and contextual elements created asymmetric disadvantages. While it was possible to identify the main sources of these participatory disadvantages and analyze their conditions of emergence, the analysis highlighted several design trade-offs that are challenging to address. However, at least one serious flaw was identified, drawing attention to how democratic innovations can inadvertently reproduce, to some extent, political harm to citizens.

The table below categorizes the experiences of deliberative disadvantage, organized according to their primary—though not exclusive—conditions of emergence.

Challenges in the GA Deliberative Journey	Definition	Observations
Bodily and Personal Disadvantages	Bodily conditions and sociodemographic markers becoming disadvantages in the GA due to interaction with design factors.	Factors include differences in formal education, social class, language proficiency, and gender-based oppression.
Situational Disadvantages	Contextual factors and trade-offs of the digital interactive environment promoting challenges to realize an ideal deliberative exchange of perspectives	Issues related to the number of participants, the celebratory atmosphere of plenaries, the balance of time for learning vs. deliberation, and the frequency and duration of sessions.
Accessibility of Resources and Information	Challenges in accessing effective deliberative services, resources, and informational feedback.	Problems include the quality and availability of translation services, difficulties using tools like the Miro Board, and accessing and receiving feedback on the GA's main output, the People's Declaration.

Table 22: Challenges and disadvantages experienced in the GA Deliberative Journey. Source: Author.

Before presenting the analysis of the deliberative experiences of disadvantage identified in this research, it is important to highlight a key finding that aligns with what Black feminist theorists have long theorized: those who were most aware of political asymmetries were precisely the individuals most affected by them (e.g. Collins, 1999).

6.2.1 Bodily and personal disadvantages

Sociopolitical asymmetries and deliberative disadvantages

After analyzing the vital experiences lived by the interviewees during the GA's deliberative process, it became evident that essential democratic ideals were realized. However, a deeper examination of the participants' narratives revealed that the Breakout Rooms design inadvertently reproduced inequalities among assembly members. This highlights the challenge of preventing external vulnerabilities from interacting with the design of democratic innovations and allowing existing bodily and societal asymmetries and political disadvantages to persist, influencing the deliberative process.

Let’s consider Maria’s experience. Although she recurrently complimented the GA design during the interview, Maria shared that she felt insecure about her formal level of education, worrying it would not be enough to make substantial contributions to the GA deliberations. On the one hand, as we considered before, design elements of the GA, such as the random selection by lottery, reassured her that there weren’t prerequisites to be an assembly member: “They also said to me that it was not a problem to have or not have a lot of study or participate (...). They drew lots, only between 6 people, and it was me (the one selected).”

On the other hand, from Maria's perspective, the democratic inclusivity of the GA was not sufficient to ensure equal participation among people with different levels of education. She demonstrated this awareness, for example, when reflecting on her deliberative interactions with other participants. She noticed that assembly members with higher formal education spoke more and were more "desenroladas," that is, more articulate in their speech than others: "They had very enlightened people. Many people 'desenroladas' (articulate) like this; we could see that they studied more (...) There were people with more education who spoke more."

Marta, who shares many intersections of social markers with Maria but participated in a different Breakout Room, also lived a similar experience. When asked during the interview if she considered that all assembly members had the same opportunity to speak and present their points of view, Marta reflected: "There was one there, Salomon, he spoke more (...), and he spoke well." Beyond identifying that more educated people like Salomon spoke more and better, Marta also noted that asymmetries in social class or "status," as she puts it, made a difference in her deliberative interactions and, personally, made her "apprehensive" to speak. She considered these "higher class" assembly members not only as peers but as "teachers," the same term she and other interviewees used to name their Breakout Facilitators.

> Then, I was very apprehensive about the questions they would ask me and worried about whether they would have people of higher class, as they did. Because there were groups of 5 people in each room, I was with another one from Venezuela, who was very nice; she reminded me a lot of myself. The rest were "teachers" (…), and there were other people (...). You could see that they had a different "status" from ours. (Marta, Latin America assembly member, emphasis added).

As I have shown, Marta and Maria observed that assembly members with higher levels of formal education, social status, and fluency in English, such as Solomon, spoke more frequently and with greater confidence in the GA. On the other hand, cultural patterns of gender oppression also reverberated within the GA, reproducing not only discursive disadvantages but also causing significant deliberative harm to one assembly member.

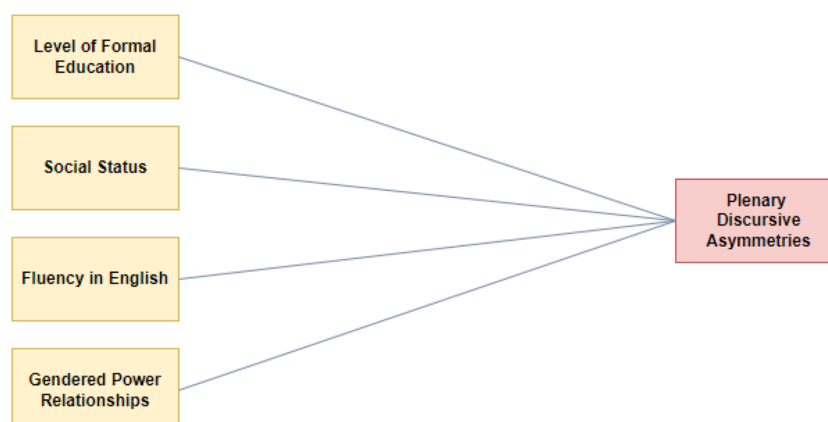

Figure 43: : Bodily and sociopolitical dimensions of Discursive Asymmetries. Source: Author.

As presented in the first chapter, Priya was one of the interviewees who narrated the most experiences of gendered constraints to her participation in the GA. Even before speaking, due to the distribution of reproductive labor prevailing in her society, Priya faced considerable challenges just to "appear" in the GA's digital interactions. These challenges stemmed from the high burden of domestic responsibilities she carries daily, compounded by psychological pressure from her brother-in-law, who questioned her husband about why his wife was neglecting household chores to participate in the assembly. Additionally, Priya shared that, due to her lack of prior political experiences and, as can be inferred, the patriarchal culture in which she lives, she struggled significantly to express herself in the assembly: "When I joined and met people for the first time, I was not able to speak anything at all. I used to be scared and hesitant to talk. What will people say when I'll talk? Will they laugh or comment on my talk?"

Perhaps informed by her personal experiences, Priya demonstrated acute political sensitivity to gender dynamics, noticing that another participant from her cultural background was facing a serious issue during GA Plenary interactions. According to Priya, the translator for this participant completely disregarded her views during deliberative sessions: "There was a lady who used to speak in my language, and I could understand clearly what she was saying. But the man sitting next to her, helping her with translation, gave a different opinion, which was not that lady's words."

Priya identified that one of the key factors contributing to this harmful situation was that the translator was the female assembly member's husband, who appeared to be reproducing patriarchal control over her within the very space of the assembly: "I was being told that the man had brought his wife into the panel. You are not allowed to bring any family member to the panel." Ultimately, Priya wasn't certain whether the GA organizers addressed this critical design failure: "I think they were removed from the assembly as I did not see them later." However, by then, the political harm had already been done.

While the design of the GA's Breakout Sessions and Plenaries did not fully prevent existing sociopolitical asymmetries from impacting the deliberative process, it is important to highlight that various design elements—analyzed earlier in this chapter—were instrumental in promoting a high degree of inclusivity, respect, reflexivity, and recognition within the GA. Moreover, Maria, Marta, and Priya reported that the personal performance of their translators, facilitators, and even fellow assembly members played a crucial role in mitigating the anxieties and discursive barriers they faced when voicing their perspectives in deliberations. These interactional forms of resilience were key to fostering what vulnerability theorists describe as

"relational autonomy" (Anderson and Honneth, 2005), enabling the most vulnerable participants to engage meaningfully in the democratic process.

From Maria's perspective, her facilitator and translator were pivotal in encouraging her to speak: “The girls were very calm (...) my translator is calm, she is a psychologist, right? And she calms you down, right, she said, ‘calm down, Maria, you don't have to answer.’” For Marta, “my translator is great, very good, and she helped me a lot. She always helped me.” Finally, according to Priya, her facilitator was instrumental in boosting her confidence and helping her navigate the interactional constraints she encountered: “She used to smile at my talk, and she used to like and praise me for what I was saying there. When I talked about my village and what I do there, she was happy.”

These accounts underscore the dual nature of democratic innovations like the GA: while structural design features can foster inclusivity, it is often the interpersonal dynamics—rooted in care, encouragement, and support—that truly empower individuals to overcome embedded social vulnerabilities and participate meaningfully in deliberative democracy.

> She used to guide me, saying I did not have to worry at all. She told me to talk fearlessly with an open heart. She said there are no right or wrong answers; just say whatever comes to your mind, and people will not laugh at you. She said, this is the time to say everything and not keep quiet and say it nicely. This is the time you can move forward. Whatever you say, they may or may not like it, but it doesn't matter. And if you say something good, they will say you spoke well. But if you say something they dislike, they will not say something wrong about you. So, keep on talking. (Priya, South Asia assembly member)

Additionally, Marta and Maria reported that despite the difficulties and asymmetries they encountered, their relationships with the people involved in the GA process enabled them, over time, to learn and develop their discursive potential while participating. For example, despite Marta’s discursive disadvantage compared to Salomon, she acknowledged that she could learn a great deal from him. The episode of dissent she narrated—and that we reconstructed in the previous section—demonstrated this: “We understood very well what he was saying (...) he said things like that in a way that we could understand better; he explained well.” Maria also recalled that participating at the beginning of the GA was much more challenging than it became after a few sessions. However, as she continued participating, she learned and improved her participatory skills: “At first, we got so nervous, you know, I had never participated in anything like this. And there were many people like that, more educated, right (…) But the girls (translator and facilitator) kept saying: ‘You tell what you know.’ The girls were great, and we had no problem.”

Notwithstanding, in the case of the assembly member who suffered gendered deliberative harm caused by her translator, as narrated by Priya, there was no indication that

the complaint was presented during the GA events or that any course of action was taken. Closer monitoring of such situations would have helped prevent this problem, highlighting the need for more robust mechanisms to detect and address power imbalances and potential harms within deliberative processes.

Should We Rotate Participants in Discussion Groups?

As indicated earlier, the Global Assembly's discussion and deliberation occurred in two settings. The first setting, which took place on average three times a week for three hours, was the Breakout Sessions. On these occasions, assembly members were divided into 20 groups, each with an average of 5 participants. Their debates were mediated by a facilitator and supported by a notetaker. The second setting was the Plenary Sessions that occurred on Saturdays. In those digital environments, all participants were together in the same virtual room to listen to experts, present the results of the debates they achieved in their Breakout Rooms to other assembly members, and engage in more interactive and dynamic activities. Additionally, random Breakout Rooms were usually formed during the Plenary Sessions, creating new discussion groups compared to those during the week.

During the interviews, we asked questions that prompted the interviewees to think about the changes and differences they experienced when talking and deliberating in those different deliberative settings. One of the main conclusions was that individuals' characteristics and preferences were the most important factor in determining the narrative of the challenges lived in each interactive environment. In this sense, I found that each interactional setting had its trade-offs.

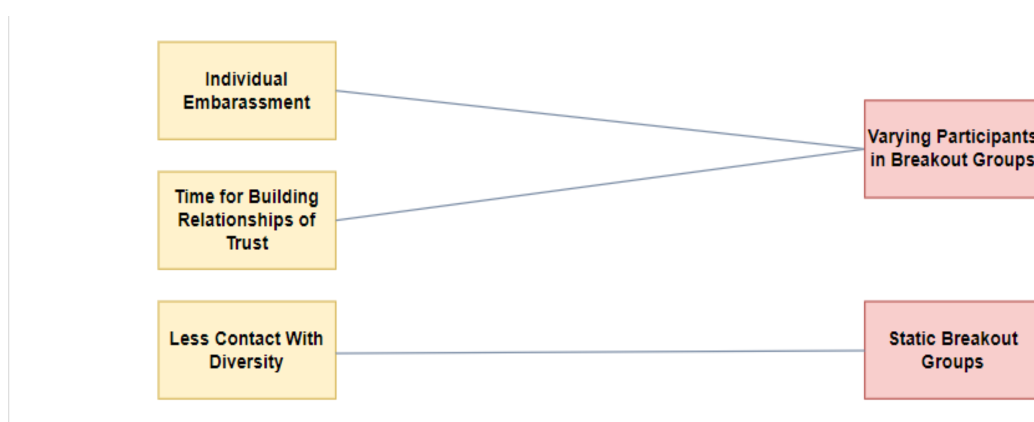

Figure 44: Trade-offs of varying or not the composition of Breakout Rooms. Source: Author.

As indicated earlier, the Global Assembly's discussions and deliberations occurred in two primary settings. The first setting, held on average three times a week for three hours, was

the Breakout Sessions. During these sessions, assembly members were divided into 20 groups, each consisting of an average of five participants. Their debates were mediated by a facilitator and supported by a notetaker. The second setting was the Plenary Sessions, which took place on Saturdays. In these digital environments, all participants gathered in the same virtual room to listen to experts, present the results of the debates from their Breakout Rooms, and engage in more interactive and dynamic activities. Additionally, random Breakout Rooms were often formed during the Plenary Sessions, creating new discussion groups compared to those in the weekly sessions.

During the interviews, we asked questions that prompted the interviewees to reflect on the changes and differences they experienced when talking and deliberating in these distinct settings. One of the main conclusions was that individuals' characteristics and preferences played a significant role in shaping their narratives about the challenges encountered in each interactive environment. In this sense, the analysis revealed that each interactional setting had its trade-offs.

For instance, in the case of Priya, a seamstress from South Asia, her preference for participating in the GA with the same fellow assembly members during deliberative sessions was deeply rooted in the bonds she had developed with them: “I wanted my group people to be together all the time, which I would have liked it better.” Similarly, Jin, a marketing assistant from East Asia, believed that maintaining the same participants was crucial because “people will gradually cultivate a kind of teamwork.” Jin observed that interacting with people one had never worked with before often led to feelings of unfamiliarity, stating that participants might “feel unfamiliar, and people will not know what to say.”

In sum, Priya and Jin's experiences suggest that for participants who are more reserved or face greater difficulties connecting with others, rotating groups might initially hinder their ability to participate effectively. The stability of group composition provided a sense of security and familiarity that supported their engagement.

On the other hand, participants like Marta, a retired woman from Latin America, understood that over time, it was possible to adapt and even benefit from meeting new people. She considered this adaptation more a matter of “routine”: “It was more complicated because we already had a routine. But then I got used to it, which was good, too.” Marta's ability to adjust highlights the potential for growth through exposure to diverse perspectives, even when initial discomfort is present.

For other participants, who found it easier to connect and collaborate with different people, the rotation of deliberative groups was seen as a highly beneficial practice. Lee, a

fisherman from Southeast Asia, preferred when groups were mixed because “then we would be able to experience the cultures of other countries and understand their grievances.” Similarly, Daniela, a hairdresser from Latin America, viewed the opportunity to engage with people from different cultural backgrounds as a chance to “see other opinions and strategies” for addressing the climate and ecological crisis.

As observed, there is no simple answer to whether rotating assembly members in Breakout Rooms would improve the overall deliberative quality of the assembly. Still, if Marta’s perspective is correct, perhaps if the GA had implemented more frequent variations in the composition of Breakout Sessions, participants might have become more adept at interacting with individuals they had less contact with. One positive consequence of this design could have been increased opportunities for personal growth and the broadening of perspectives. On the other hand, in the GA, the compositions of the Breakout Sessions were largely predetermined by the time zones of the assembly members—a situation that brought other serious interactional trade-offs, as I will explore later in this chapter. This time zone-based grouping facilitated logistical feasibility but may have inadvertently limited the diversity of interactions that could have enriched the deliberative process.

6.2.2 Situational disadvantages

More trade-offs: Contextual characteristics of the Breakout Rooms and Plenary Sessions

As I discussed in the first part of the chapter, the design of the Breakout Rooms and Plenary Sessions, particularly the equitable distribution of speaking time and the performance of facilitators, played a crucial role in the assembly members' experiences and in qualifying the GA as a truly democratic participatory process. However, beyond the general design, contextual characteristics of the GA interactions, such as the over-celebratory atmosphere of the plenaries and the challenging balance between learning and deliberative activities in the Breakout Rooms, led to unforeseen tradeoffs.

Three interviewees felt that certain aspects of the interactive environment in the plenaries were not completely satisfactory.

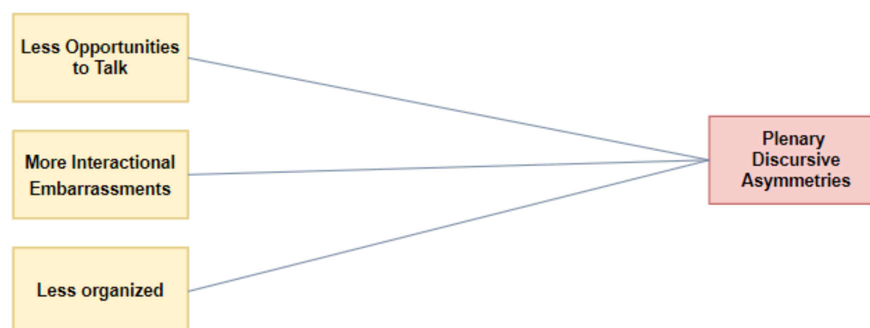

Figure 45: Context-Induced Discursive Disadvantages in the GA Plenary. Source: Author.

For Maria, an elderly cook from Latin America, the crowded environment of the plenaries created considerable participatory disadvantages. On the one hand, the elevated number of participants reduced her opportunities to present her perspectives to others. She also pointed out that the "party" environment of the plenaries made it harder to assimilate new information, especially for someone like her who had been distant from formal learning environments for decades: "There were people there who didn't even speak because it was everyone, you know (...) And so it was (...) It was more difficult to learn."

From Carlos's standpoint, an undergraduate student from Latin America, the number of participants in the plenary sessions also caused him to "feel that people spoke a little less." However, this was not due to his level of education but rather to a sense of self-consciousness: "It was out of embarrassment because there were a lot of people." Finally, Yuyan added that the difficulties experienced in the plenary sessions were not only a consequence of the number of people present but also due to the characteristics of its interactional process, which she considered to be "a little bit disordered. Everyone was busy, and time for communication was limited."

Moving from the plenary interactional environment to the Breakout Rooms, beyond the deliberative disadvantages that emerged in the former context due to its "classroom" characteristics—a situation that I will cover later in this chapter—some interviewees pointed out another contextual factor that could be improved: the organization and distribution of time by the GA facilitators for learning and discussion in each deliberative session.

One of the participants who experienced challenges related to this situation was Kemba, a high school student from Southern Africa. Kemba recalled some Breakout Sessions, even during the advanced phases of the GA, where his group had little time for discussion, although he did not provide more details. Daniela, a hairdresser from Latin America, also expressed dissatisfaction with the limited time available to present questions and speak at length. She

suggested: “Instead of having 2 hours, perhaps 2.5 or 3 hours, so that everybody shared all of their opinions.” It is worth considering that, by design, the Breakout Sessions were intended to last 3 hours. Could Daniela's Breakout Room have had meetings that ended earlier than planned? Moreover, as noted in the last chapter, many participants affirmed that the duration of the Breakout Sessions was already too long, causing some of them to become tired and impacting their levels of engagement in the learning phase, especially for the elderly participants.

On the other hand, Marta, a retired participant from Latin America, presented a pertinent issue that invites analysis to determine whether there was truly insufficient time for debate or if the distribution of time for deliberation was a contextual problem in some Breakout Sessions. For Marta, the main issue was the prevalence of learning dynamics over deliberative interactions in the GA. These dynamics included collective readings and Q&A sessions facilitated by the Breakout facilitators. Although these pedagogical activities were key for fostering learning—especially for participants who didn’t have time to study the learning materials before the deliberative meetings, as mentioned in the last chapter—the time reserved for debate and deliberation among assembly members became limited: “At that time, the translator said what you would have to answer. Or else we read on the screen; it was a lot, very fast, and very little time and a lot to read.”

As a GA notetaker, I observed similar patterns and agree with Marta that the structured learning activities may have encroached on the time for open discussion, reducing opportunities for participants to engage in more in-depth debates and deliberations. Moreover, these contextual characteristics of the deliberative sessions contributed to reinforcing a classroom-like environment, creating another challenge for fostering more robust deliberative interactions among assembly members.

No reasons to disagree?

Although only Marta, the retired lady from Latin America, narrated a detailed dissent experience lived in the GA deliberative interactions, the majority of the other interviewees confirmed that dissenting experiences of respectful disagreements occurred in their Breakout Rooms and that they felt comfortable questioning and disagreeing with the viewpoints of other participants in the Global Assembly. Still, when I considered the learning experiences of the interviewees in Chapter 2, it became clear that not everyone, by the end of the process, held the same perspectives and preferences regarding the most effective course of political action to

address the ecological and climate crisis. Shouldn't this situation have promoted more remarkable debates among participants during the GA?

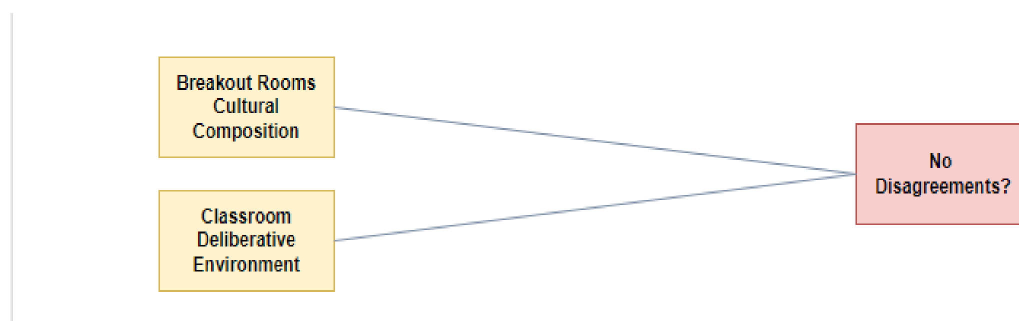

Figure 46: Interactional Factors Limiting Dissent. Source: Author.

When asked about dissent and disagreements experienced during the GA, Lee, a Southeast Asian fisherman, reported that such situations rarely occurred. This was because, although his peers "had different questions," their "answers were all the same." Similarly, Yuyan, an undergraduate student from Eastern Asia, enthusiastically shared that "different from other groups with disagreements during discussions, we always held similar opinions." Additionally, Jin, a marketing assistant from Eastern Asia, noted that his peers were also "close in opinions" and didn't have many reasons to disagree. Based on his experience, one of Jin's conclusions was that even "people from different places have a lot of similarities."

But was it just a coincidence that three participants from Asia considered their Breakout Rooms to be composed of people with similar opinions? Undoubtedly, a more in-depth analysis of the interactions that our Asian interviewees experienced would be necessary to provide a more substantiated answer to this question. Nonetheless, intrigued by this finding, I reviewed the GA documentation to verify the ethnic and cultural composition of their Breakout Rooms. In this analysis, it caught my attention that all participants from Asia were allocated—primarily due to time zone criteria—with other Asian participants. Additionally, in an attempt to represent world population demographics, most breakout rooms with participants from Asian countries were predominantly composed of individuals from India and China. To be more precise, there were at least four Breakout Rooms composed solely of participants from India and China.

I'm not suggesting that these countries lack cultural and individual variability. Still, it's notable that the Asian participants, particularly those from India and China, had significantly fewer interactions with diverse cultures compared to other assembly members. In sum, the global experience was limited in these breakout groups, as only two nationalities were represented. While people sharing the same nationality can have diverse experiences, their realities are also shaped by the nation-state, particularly regarding climate policy and politics.

This homogeneity could explain why Lee, Yuyan, and Jin perceived their fellow assembly members as holding mostly similar opinions.

Another situation that prompted reflection was that in most Asian Breakout Rooms, participants from India and China dominated, with only one or two assembly members from other Asian countries. This was exactly the case with our fisherman, Lee, who was in a Breakout Room with two participants from China and one from India. According to Lee, he had questions he wanted to ask the Chinese participants regarding coal use in their country, but he admitted, “I didn’t mention it because I didn’t want to hurt their feelings.” Nonetheless, Lee acknowledged the variability among individuals, stating that he knows Chinese people who “said coal is also a problem in China.”

The academic debate about deliberation in different cultures is extensive and of utmost importance when considering the potential for implementing deliberative democracy in diverse nations and communities (c.f. Min, 2009; Sass and Dryzek, 2014; Parthasarathy, 2019), with the caution of not reproducing colonial structures (Banerjee, 2022). On the other hand, the debate on creating deliberative processes that empower cultural diversity in transnational citizen assemblies—while managing practical dilemmas like synchronizing participants' time—is only beginning. My initial analysis showed that the GA Breakout Rooms had varying degrees of cultural heterogeneity, mainly due to understandable logistical reasons, particularly time zones. Still, this situation may have contextually impacted the level of respectful dissent and the perception among different Asian assembly members that their peers mostly held similar opinions. Only a more granular analysis of these Breakout Rooms could confirm the concrete effect of this situation. Nevertheless, other aspects of the GA's interactive environment may have contributed to this low level of dissent and disagreement among assembly members, which I will consider next.

The GA Classroom Deliberative Environment

As analyzed in the previous chapter, beyond design factors, assembly members and facilitators frequently intersubjectively defined the GA Breakout Rooms as “classrooms” and performed the roles of “teachers” and “students” among themselves. Despite the benefits that a classroom interactional structure brought to the assembly members—not only in terms of information transmission but also in keeping them motivated and engaged—it also generated some undesirable consequences and disadvantages for their deliberation.

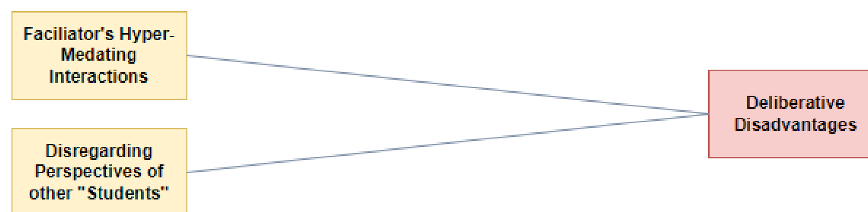

Figure 47: "Classroom" Environment Limiting Discussions. Source: Author.

Among the interviewees, only Muhammad, an engineer originally from Western Asia but residing in North America, identified a specific dimension of his Breakout Room's interactional structure that directly impacted the deliberative dynamics: facilitators' "hyper-mediating" discussions. Reflecting on his participatory experience, Muhammad noted that "all communication went through the facilitator." Whenever he and his colleagues responded to questions or reacted to each other's comments, he explained, "I would respond to someone through the facilitator." According to Muhammad, the interactions between assembly members in the Breakout Sessions were "limited," being "relatively brief and to the point." Drawing from my own experience as a notetaker, I can confirm that this situation was not unique to Muhammad's Breakout Room.

This hyper-mediation not only restricted the flow of spontaneous dialogue and direct exchanges among participants but also limited the depth and richness of the deliberative process. Moreover, it likely influenced the occurrence of respectful dissent within the Breakout Rooms. The over-reliance on facilitators as the primary conduit for communication may have unintentionally hindered the development of organic, peer-to-peer deliberation—a key element for fostering critical reflection and democratic engagement.

Another experience that illustrates how a classroom-like environment can constrain the potential of deliberative interactions comes from Chima, a subsistence farmer from Central Africa. On the one hand, Chima recalled having respectful discussions with his peers in the deliberative room: "Yes, there were many moments during deliberative sessions when we as participants had disagreements and did not agree with one another." Furthermore, he acknowledged that the group was able to produce common propositions and democratically "agree on something together."

However, Chima also admitted that he wasn't fully open to trusting or considering his peers' contributions. He perceived them as "students," whose level of knowledge he viewed as inferior to that of his "teachers"—the GA experts and facilitators. As he put it, "For me, I knew no one could tell me anything that I could accept whether it was my groupmates or friends. I

only trusted the response and clarity that I would receive from the experts or our group facilitators."

This dynamic highlights how the interactional distinction between "students" and "teachers," a framing used by Chima and echoed by other assembly members, stifled the potential for rich, collaborative dialogue and productive dissent. It created an environment where authority was concentrated in the hands of facilitators and experts, undermining the possibility of mutual learning and critical engagement among peers—both essential components of democratic deliberation.

6.2.3 Accessibility of resources and information

Lost in translation part 2

When analyzing the challenges and learning disadvantages faced by assembly members while listening to testimonies from climate witnesses and experts, or during collective readings in the Breakout Sessions, I considered the key role of translation in the process. However, when examining deliberative experiences, I identified new issues and dilemmas related to the provision of this valuable participatory resource.

The most frequently reported issue regarding translation was the time required to complete the process. Carlos, an undergraduate student from Latin America, was one of the participants who encountered this challenge. To summarize how Carlos described his experience: the process began with Participant "A" expressing themselves to their translator, who then interpreted and translated the message into English. This was passed on to other translators, who conveyed it to the participants they supported. After Participant "B" reflected and formulated a response, the process had to start again. Inevitably, this highly mediated interaction significantly impacted the fluidity of discussions, often causing delays of "four or five minutes," as Carlos noted.

Further analysis of deliberative experiences revealed that participants relying on remote translation services faced additional challenges, particularly due to internet connectivity issues. Daniela, a hairdresser from Latin America, highlighted this problem, stating, "Sometimes my translator lost internet connection, or I had failures with my own connection." These disruptions not only caused delays, as Carlos described, but also made Daniela feel less connected and engaged with her fellow assembly members: "It wasn't like being there and interacting with them in the moment when I didn't understand something."

Jin, a marketing assistant from Eastern Asia, noted that the problems with remote translation extended beyond internet issues. He recalled instances where his translator had to

provide collective remote translation for other Eastern Asian participants who shared his language, due to the absence of dedicated translators. Additionally, Jin observed inconsistencies in translation speed and quality, depending on the translator's approach: "Translators worked in different ways. Some translated paragraph by paragraph, and I felt we waited too long. The first translator translated sentence by sentence, which was better."

The role of translators in the deliberative process was so critical that their absence could disrupt the entire interaction. This was the case for Maria, a cook from Latin America, who missed the final GA session because her translator fell ill. Maria's experience underscores how the absence of a translator can create significant barriers: "I couldn't contact anyone. On the last day, Saturday, I didn't participate because the translator got sick with COVID. (…) And if I went alone, it would've been useless."

Conversely, the way translators performed their roles sometimes led to them overshadowing the assembly members they supported. Marta, a retiree from Latin America, felt that due to the dynamics of translation, she saw and heard more from one participant's translator than from the participant themselves: "We almost didn't see him; we saw his translator more than him." Kemba's community host from Southern Africa echoed this concern, noting that Kemba's translator not only dominated the interaction but also often failed to convey his intended message accurately: "With the translator on the side, there wasn't much opportunity for the participant to express himself or herself fully (…) and sometimes what the translator says isn't exactly what the participant wants to express."

Given that most assembly members and even community hosts were not proficient in English, how could one assess whether the translation provided was accurate and satisfactory?

Only one interviewee, proficient in English, offered a more critical perspective on the translation. Yuyan, an undergraduate student from Eastern Asia, recalled that while her translator did a good job conveying others' information to her, the quality dropped significantly when expressing her own thoughts and emotions: "It was not easy for the translator to fully express my ideas and emotions." However, thanks to her English skills, she managed to mitigate this by speaking for herself whenever possible: "If I spoke on my own, although not very fluently, people could understand my opinions more directly. As a result, I've been working hard to improve my oral English to communicate more easily." Yet, how many other assembly members had the agency or language skills to critically assess and intervene in the translation they received?

The Miro Board

The Miro Board is an online collaborative tool that allows multiple people to work together on a digital whiteboard. It is commonly used for planning, brainstorming, and visualizing ideas, enabling participants to add notes, drawings, and text in real-time, which facilitates efficient collaboration. Due to these features, the Miro Board was employed in the GA in various ways—particularly to engage participants in learning activities and as an interactive space where assembly members' propositions were recorded and made visible to all involved.

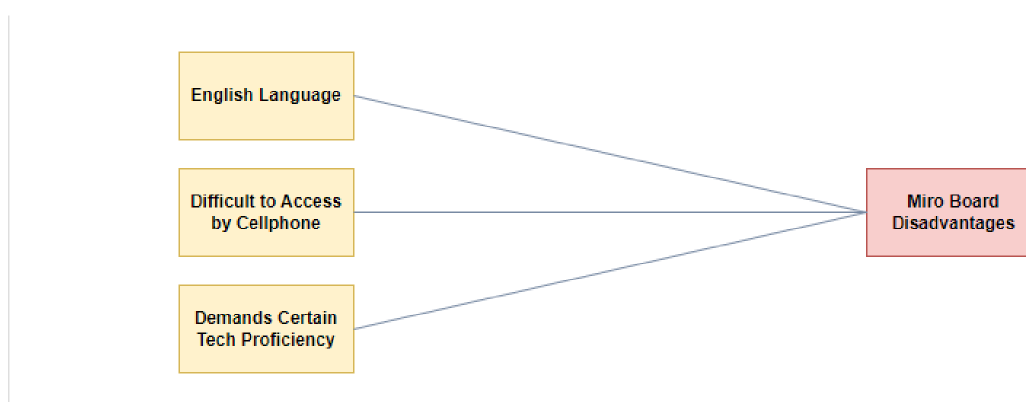

Figure 48: Disadvantages in Accessing the Miro Board. Source: Author.

Despite its potential as a digital discussion tool, the Miro Board presented several challenges for assembly members during the GA's Breakout Sessions. Our interviewed community hosts, who were responsible for managing technology for the participants, highlighted these issues. The fact that the Miro Board interface was only available in English posed a significant barrier for non-English-speaking participants, complicating their ability to visualize and interact with the tool. For participants connecting to the GA via their cell phones, using the Miro Board was nearly impossible due to the difficulty of navigating the application on a small screen. Even those using computers struggled to access and operate Miro effectively. Lee, a fisherman from Southeast Asia, shared his frustrations, noting that even with help from his translator, they both found it challenging: "Even my friend who helped me translate didn't understand how to use Miro, so we were struggling."

In my analysis, I found no evidence of adaptations or workarounds developed by participants to manage these technological barriers. Consequently, the tool gradually fell out of use throughout the GA.

People's Declaration Accessibility and Feedback

As defined at the end of Chapter Two, the decision-making vulnerability of citizens in participatory processes is significantly heightened when their prolonged efforts and valued recommendations fail to yield tangible outcomes in public policy. Fernández-Martínez and colleagues (2020) highlight this issue in their study on participatory frustration in Spain, focusing on Participatory Budgeting (PB) and Advisory Councils (AC). Their research reveals that frustration, discouragement, and disenchantment often arise when citizens' contributions are met with inflated expectations, poorly designed mechanisms, unsatisfactory results, or the abrupt discontinuation of participatory processes.

Did similar negative experiences arise at the end of our interviewees' participatory journey?

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the interviewees reported very positive experiences regarding the production of the People's Declaration, recognizing the quality and democratic legitimacy of the process. However, I identified several concerning experiences and perspectives that participants shared regarding the People's Declaration, particularly after the GA events. These issues appear to stem from problems related to accessibility, limited contact with the document, and a lack of information about its consequences and impacts.

One concerning finding from the interviews was that many participants did not recall the People's Declaration just three months after the assembly. For instance, Maria, a cook from Latin America, when asked about the document, admitted, "I don't remember that much," and seemed to base her opinion largely on her translator's feedback: "I remember that when the document was sent there [to COP-26], the translator said, 'Look, Maria, it was good, but it wasn't as we thought.' That's what she passed on to me."

A similar situation occurred during Priya's interview, a seamstress from South Asia. She also couldn't recall the People's Declaration. Her translator, who had also worked during the GA, tried to jog her memory by asking leading questions: "Do you remember the key points of the declaration? In the end, we submitted it, and then we voted on what was correct or not." After several attempts, the translator apologized, suggesting that perhaps the document's technical language contributed to Priya's lack of recollection: "Sorry, Manish, it was very technical for her; I don't think she remembers any of it."

Another assembly member, Raj, was unable to answer any questions about the declaration. His community host, who mediated the interview, was visibly embarrassed and tried to explain the document's content, ultimately justifying Raj's lack of memory by saying,

"He doesn't remember any of that since it's been a long time." Similarly, Kemba, a high school student from Southern Africa, responded simply: "I don't remember."

Many interviewees' inability to recall the People's Declaration may be attributed to the document's technical language and the time elapsed since the GA. Additionally, difficulties in accessing the document and the absence of follow-up communication about its impact likely contributed to this disconnect, fostering pessimistic expectations among some participants.

Marta, a retired participant from Latin America, exemplified this uncertainty. While she remembered parts of the document and described it as "very good," the lack of information about its subsequent influence left her questioning its significance: "Will this document solve it? Will it change anything? That was my concern—that was all." Muhammad, an engineer from Western Asia, was even more pessimistic. Without any information about the People's Declaration's fate, he remarked, "I don't think it will significantly impact anything (…) Climate change is a much larger economic issue, and when it comes to the economy, it goes beyond the people's control."

On a more hopeful note, Amina, from Western Asia and currently working as an NGO coordinator in North America, believed the People's Declaration might have resonated with COP-26 actors: "The governments might have liked the idea." However, she added, "It needs more work until they take us seriously," expressing her concern that, without further action or communication, the delivery of the People's Declaration at COP-26 seemed to mark the end of the GA's efforts to influence global climate governance.

Without adequate accessibility to the People's Declaration and meaningful feedback on its impact, the transformative potential of the GA risks being diminished. As Dewey (1939) theorized—and as reflected in the experiences presented above—without a proper sense of closure and fulfillment, much of the value of participatory experiences can be lost, potentially leading to apathy, disenchantment, and disbelief in the power of democratic engagement (e.g. Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020).

6.3 Deliberative vital experiences: Grounded theoretical propositions

Throughout this chapter, I mapped the deliberative experiences of the GA participants we interviewed, analyzing the conditions under which these experiences emerged and their subjective and interactional consequences. Additionally, I identified how the interaction between participants' vulnerabilities, sociodemographic markers, and the design and demands of the GA created asymmetric disadvantages—and, in some cases, even participatory harms. While some adaptations and improvised forms of resilience were identified, these were

relatively rare compared to other chapters. I will now outline three key lessons derived from the grounded theory analysis.

First, the Global Assembly's deliberative journey created conditions that fostered a sense of empathetic reflexivity among participants. Beyond enhancing their deliberation, mutual communication, and reflection on preferences and interests (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 1–2), this empathetic reflexivity enabled individuals to develop long-term caring relationships toward people and problems they had not previously perceived as relevant to their own lives.

As discussed in the previous chapter, GA participants expanded their scientific and political knowledge about the climate and ecological crisis through expert presentations and testimonies from invited witnesses. However, when focusing on their deliberative interactions, I found that personal testimonies shared by fellow assembly members—whether about climate precarity, everyday micropolitical resistance to climate change, or alternative ways of relating to nature and more-than-human entities—did more than just foster reflection. These narratives emotionally engaged participants, creating lasting connections that persisted even three months after the GA.

This suggests that these listening experiences foster something beyond simple empathy or cognitive reflection. Instead, they trigger a process where emotion and critical thinking interact, producing relationships of care for others and their problems.

By empathetic reflexivity, I refer to the performative effect of a listening experience in which someone reflects so deeply and/or for such an extended period on another person's life that they develop a lasting sense of care—not just for the individual, but for the issue or drama they narrated. Beyond enhancing deliberative interactions, this process encouraged interviewees to question how their own perspectives, preferences, and behaviors relate to the lived experiences they encountered. It also created the conditions for individuals to become concerned about issues that had not previously affected them, thereby expanding the political significance of these problems.

But why is this process important, not only for discrete deliberative events but also for democracy as a whole?

Drawing on John Dewey's (1927) democratic theory, I argue that when citizens develop empathetic reflexivity toward each other and start to care about one another's life stories, this becomes fundamental to democracy's perpetual growth—or what Dewey terms meliorism[41]."

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[41] Dewey describes "meliorism" as a normative concept that asserts "that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event, may be bettered" (Dewey, 1920, p.177).

For Dewey, democracies are constantly being tested by emerging social problems. When existing democratic institutions neglect or fail to address these issues, it becomes necessary for “publics”—groups of citizens who recognize themselves as affected by a problem—to organize, exert pressure, directly intervene, or elect representatives capable of catalyzing democratic innovations.

However, the formation of a public requires a shared recognition of being affected by something. In this sense, the “public” is not a static group but one that can expand as individuals come to realize their connection to broader societal concerns. By nurturing empathetic reflexivity in participatory processes like the GA, participants began to care about problems they had previously overlooked. Through this process, they became virtually or concretely connected to broader publics concerned with issues such as the climate and ecological crises.

During the interviews, we gathered evidence that this process of connection and engagement continued even after the GA concluded, as I will explore in the next section.

The analysis also demonstrated that the development of empathetic reflexivity—and the sense of political recognition that participants experienced—did not occur spontaneously. Instead, various design mechanisms and contextual interactional factors played a crucial role in fostering and deepening these connections, both between individuals and with the issues under discussion. These design features were key to enhancing the participants' democratic “deliberative stance”, as Owen and Smith (2015) would name.

For example, linguistic diversity in the ways participants expressed themselves—ranging from spoken language to body language and even artistic performances—significantly contributed to this process. The affective dimensions of communication, such as tone, gestures, and emotional expression, enriched participants' understanding and connection with one another. Additionally, facilitators played a critical role in ensuring equal participation. Their efforts to distribute speaking time fairly, actively encourage quieter participants, and provide emotional support were pivotal. Facilitators helped create an environment where participants felt heard and valued, regardless of their background or prior political experience. Furthermore, the respectful exchange of ideas among participants was fundamental. The willingness to engage with differing perspectives, ask critical questions, and even disagree constructively contributed to an environment where ideas could evolve through collective reflection. As Kemba put it, participants would place each other's ideas "on a ruler"—measuring, comparing,

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He also states that "Growth itself is the only moral end," emphasizing that the essence of democracy is the relentless pursuit of improving the concrete lives of everyone (Dewey, 1920, p.178).

and refining them together. This collaborative dynamic not only strengthened individual viewpoints but also enriched the overall quality of deliberation.

Second, although the assembly members experienced and evaluated the GA deliberative journey as a transformative democratic experience—feeling politically included, respected, and recognized by other assembly members and GA organizers—'external' vulnerabilities and inequalities that could have been mitigated created design trade-offs that, to some extent, reiterated deliberative disadvantages for participants.

Despite its deliberative and democratic design, inspired by and improving upon a citizen assembly model successfully recognized for decades (e.g., Warren and Pearse, 2008), the GA, like other citizens' assemblies and mini-publics, cannot fully avoid—and sometimes even intensifies—vulnerabilities and political inequalities “external” to its process. As the research demonstrated, echoing the findings of feminist theorists of political standpoint (e.g., Harding, 2004), those who experienced asymmetrical political disadvantage or harm were often the ones who identified and voiced these situations during interviews. This highlights that focusing on participants more vulnerable than others proved productive for the research.

For example, the impact of asymmetries in formal education, class, social status, fluency in English, and gendered power dynamics on the frequency and quality of assembly members' contributions was primarily highlighted by female participants in precarious financial situations, with low levels of formal education, and no fluency in English. This is not a coincidence, as political science has long correlated the socialization of individuals in low socioeconomic conditions with limited political participation experiences, leading to greater challenges in political engagement (e.g., Knupfer, 1954, apud Pateman, 1970, p. 50). Moreover, promising technologies designed to enhance deliberative engagement, such as the Miro board, posed challenges for participants who relied solely on cell phones to connect to the GA and had limited technological skills. Some participants noted that they developed the political skills and emotional resilience needed to mitigate these challenges. However, further studies are required to understand the timeline and conditions necessary for such developments to occur.

Nonetheless, one key finding presented in this chapter is that as the sociopolitical heterogeneity of participants in a democratic innovation increases—which is highly desirable from a democratic standpoint—design trade-offs become more complex and challenging, rendering simplistic solutions unfeasible. These trade-offs are observable in many dimensions of the GA.

For instance, grouping participants based on similar time zones was an understandable logistical decision, likely preventing many from having to sacrifice their nights for extended

deliberations with individuals from distant regions. However, this choice affected the cultural diversity of several Breakout Rooms, particularly in Asia, possibly contributing to fewer respectful and productive debates and disagreements.

Without the support of translators and facilitators, a global democratic innovation like the GA would not have succeeded. Even if technologies and artificial intelligence could replace these roles in the future, the research revealed that both were essential in mitigating asymmetries and participatory disadvantages faced by the most vulnerable participants. They contextualized discussions, facilitated the interpretation and reflection on complex topics, and motivated assembly members to share their viewpoints in potentially intimidating situations—such as speaking before more formally educated individuals or navigating moments of dissent. Facilitators also played a crucial role in ensuring inclusivity and parity of participation by managing speaking time and rotating opportunities to speak among participants.

On the other hand, some participants' complete reliance on translators led to situations where translators effectively became the main speakers. In some cases, they overshadowed assembly members during digital sessions, altering or even disregarding the participants' perspectives and preferences. To exercise response-abilities in the face of these translation disadvantages, participants needed a level of English proficiency that nearly rendered translators unnecessary—as was the case with Yuyan from Eastern Asia, who preferred to express her emotions directly rather than relying on translation.

Similarly, facilitators' central role in certain Breakout Rooms positioned them as the primary interlocutors, shifting assembly members' focus away from each other. As observed by one assembly member and confirmed through my experience as a GA notetaker, this dynamic reduced peer-to-peer interaction, which should have been the primary mode of engagement. I found few instances where assembly members exercised response-abilities to counteract the unintended classroom-like structure of some Breakout Rooms.

Completely anticipating and addressing these and other deliberative trade-offs in advance is impossible. However, this does not justify avoiding experimentation with democratic innovations, as such experiments are vital for fostering creative democracies, according to John Dewey (1939a). It is necessary to view equality not as a fixed outcome achieved through design but as an ongoing "test"—something that must be continuously questioned and reevaluated, as Rancière (2004, p. 30) suggests. This approach demands constant meta-reflexivity, intervention, and adaptation of the initial design to address emerging challenges.

Third, the process of co-creating the People's Declaration and presenting this significant document at COP-26 was crucial in fostering a sense of political competence and efficacy among participants. This sense of efficacy played a vital role in keeping them motivated and engaged in promoting the Global Assembly (GA) beyond the formal event, influencing their daily interactions. However, the absence of feedback on the outcomes achieved, along with other factors, undermined the potential for this democratic innovation to take root and spread throughout societies.

Since they began altering their conditions of "political appearing" (Butler, 2022)—a process that started for some assembly members as early as the lottery selection to participate in the GA—our interviewees experienced changes in their conditions of recognizability and political self-esteem. During the GA's learning and deliberative process, assembly members demonstrated to each other—and to themselves—that, with the necessary resources and support, they could expand their perspectives on the climate crisis. They appropriated scientific concepts to make sense of their local realities and questioned how political factors were intertwined with this phenomenon. Moreover, with the collaboration of facilitators, translators, and fellow assembly members, they confidently presented their viewpoints. As Kemba from Southeastern Africa put it, they engaged in debates and discussions that served as a "ruler" to refine their ideas. They showed each other that they were also "intellectuals," capable and politically competent, as Raj from Eastern Asia noted. It is no surprise that, upon recognizing that the principles, values, propositions, and even the very words they co-constructed for the People's Declaration were objectified, expressed, and acknowledged at COP-26, interviewees like Amina from Western Asia felt empowered and truly capable of influencing global climate governance.

By the end of the process, it became evident that, beyond the concrete results the People's Declaration might achieve, one of the GA's key accomplishments was fostering a critical asset of democratic participation: a sense of political competence or efficacy, as theorized by Carole Pateman (1970).

Pateman's theory of participatory democracy (1970) argues that national representative institutions alone are insufficient for sustaining democracy. She contends that without environments that nurture democratic skills and predispositions, individuals may gravitate toward authoritarian leaders and undemocratic practices (Pateman, 1970, p. 42, 53, 105). Pateman's studies show that participation in democratic processes educates citizens, fostering the skills necessary to defend and promote democracy. A crucial element in this process is the sense of political competence or efficacy, which enables individuals to believe that their

political actions can influence the political process, thus motivating continued civic engagement (p. 187). Pateman asserts, "Participation develops and fosters the very qualities necessary for it; the more individuals participate, the better able they become to do so" (Pateman, 1970, p. 42). This self-sustaining participatory system enhances democracy's stability and vitality, as individuals generalize their democratic experiences to broader societal contexts (Pateman, 1970, p. 47).

In the conclusions of this experiential Grounded Theory on the GA, alongside revisiting the main findings discussed in previous chapters, I will reflect on the challenges and participatory disadvantages that emerged during the GA journey. I will also consider the extent to which the valuable sense of political competence or efficacy cultivated through the GA has sown new seeds, grown, and borne fruit in the lives of our interviewees. Beyond the positive transformations, I will examine the challenges and obstacles that hindered the realization of Pateman's theoretical hypothesis—barriers that prevented participants from enhancing the democratic qualities of their domestic, work, and everyday political relationships, as well as from disseminating the lessons and values consolidated in the People's Declaration.

One significant issue was the abrupt disconnection of assembly members from each other and from the GA itself. This disconnection left some participants not only disheartened about the impact of this democratic innovation, as research is already demonstrating (Fernández-Martínez et al., 2020), but also less motivated to continue confronting the apathy and disinterest of friends and family regarding the possibilities of addressing the global climate and environmental crisis.

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CONCLUSION: FOR AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH TO DEMOCRATIC INNOVATIONS

The primary goal of this thesis was to examine the Global Assembly on Climate and Ecological Crisis, the first global-scale citizens' assembly, focusing on the transformative or vital democratic experiences it afforded to its participants. By using the term "afforded," I aim to explore how the interplay between the assembly's design and demands, alongside participants' sociodemographic characteristics and vulnerabilities, influenced the quality and consequences of their participatory experiences. To achieve this, I constructed a qualitative research design grounded in the Normative and Experiential approaches of Grounded Theory to meticulously reconstruct the participatory experiences of a diverse sample of Global South assembly members. This experiential database was supplemented by in-depth interviews with GA collaborators and organizers, an analysis of official GA documents, and my participatory-observant experience as a former GA notetaker.

The thesis begins with **Chapter 1**, which examines the importance of considering democracies and democratic innovations through the lens of experience and vulnerability. Drawing on John Dewey's pragmatism and his experiential theory of "creative democracy" (Dewey, 1920; 1927; 1939; 1946; 1980), the chapter emphasizes that democracies are not solely about elections but also about the normative commitments, institutions, and everyday interactive experiences that enable citizens to collectively address issues affecting their lives, such as the climate crisis. The chapter argues that when democratic processes become overly mechanical and bureaucratic, they risk fostering disenchantment and apathy, undermining democratic practices. Creating opportunities for citizens to engage in democratic problem-solving can cultivate valuable political, cognitive, and emotional skills, along with social ties that spread democratic values from the bottom up (Pateman, 1970).

The chapter also addresses criticisms of Dewey's theories, particularly for potentially overlooking power structures, by integrating contemporary feminist theories of vulnerability (Hildreth, 2009; Collins, 2012). This integration recognizes that citizens' bodily and social vulnerabilities are not homogeneous and that these vulnerabilities introduce varied differences in how individuals experience political processes (Goodin, 1985; Gilson, 2011; Fineman, 2012; Mackenzie, 2014). It underscores the importance of considering the standpoints of vulnerable subjects in political analysis and highlights the need for methodologies that mitigate biases and potential harms when representing political vulnerabilities (Butler, 2009; 2015; 2021; Butler & Athanasiou, 2016; Cole, 2017; Rancière, 1995). By proposing an experiential framework to

interpret citizens' journeys in the GA, the chapter sets the stage for critically examining the qualities and consequences of democratic innovations.

Chapter 2 presents a literature review to explore how existing studies on democratic innovations can be interpreted through the concepts of vital experiences and vulnerabilities. The review examines various approaches and definitions to identify which political vulnerabilities democratic innovations should address and what types of democratic experiences are considered ideal for achieving these goals. The analysis, particularly focused on citizens' assemblies like the GA, reveals that while democratic innovations aim to address diverse political vulnerabilities—such as decision-making, epistemic, discursive, and policy effectiveness—there is no universal blueprint for their design and implementation. The findings underscore the importance of considering the contextual and often ambiguous nature of democratic innovation processes and outcomes (Dewey, 1980). These insights informed the research methodology, emphasizing the need for a nuanced and critical approach to studying democratic innovations.

Chapter 3 outlines the research methodology used to conduct a critical and experiential analysis of the GA. The study employs a qualitative interpretive research design, utilizing two versions of Grounded Theory methodology—Normative and Experiential (Charmaz, 2006; Ackerly et al., 2021)—to generate and analyze data. The chapter details the innovative and decentralized design of the GA, which involved extensive collaboration across multiple countries to create ideal deliberative conditions for global citizen participation. The data generation strategy included in-depth interviews with GA participants and organizers, structured with an experiential interview script to capture participants' journeys and reflections on the GA's design and demands. This approach enabled a rich, contextual understanding of the experiences and vulnerabilities of the most disadvantaged GA participants. The analysis involved a rigorous coding process to identify different types of vital experiences, political vulnerabilities, and response-abilities, which were then organized into theoretical analytic narratives connected to broader democratic theory and practice (Charmaz, 2006).

The second part of the thesis, encompassing **Chapters 4, 5, and 6**, presents three primary sets of vital democratic experiences identified through Grounded Theory categorical analysis. Each set is detailed through analytical narratives that uncover the conditions of emergence and variation in participants' experiences within the GA. These narratives explore how the GA's design and demands impacted participants' political vulnerabilities, highlighting participatory disadvantages and harms encountered in their journeys. Distinct axial concepts drawn from democratic theories, such as "democratic appearance" and "deliberation" (Arendt,

1958; Honneth, 1995), alongside those emerging from Grounded Theory itself, such as "empathetic reflexivity" and "practical representatives," are used to interpret and connect the reconstructed experiential accounts.

Chapter 4 explores the democratic transformations experienced by participants upon their selection for the GA and their engagement in its digital interactions. The chapter highlights how these experiences, though seemingly ordinary, were perceived as vital by participants because they disrupted their habitual routines and transformed their conditions of democratic appearance, recognition, and political identity (Arendt, 1958; Honneth, 1995). The analysis reveals that the GA's design fostered new forms of political "self-disclosure" and practical "self-relations," motivating participants to persist despite the participatory costs and demands. This process led both participants and non-participants to recognize them as "practical" political representatives and spokespersons on the climate and ecological crisis. The chapter also examines the significant demands and constraints imposed by the GA's design, particularly in the context of the 2021 pandemic. Participants faced challenges related to accessing technological resources and balancing GA schedules with other responsibilities. Female participants, in particular, struggled to manage domestic labor alongside their GA commitments. The chapter discusses how political vulnerabilities were both exacerbated and mitigated through personal networks, highlighting the complex interplay between support and dependency in democratic innovations.

Chapter 5 focuses on the transformative learning experiences of GA participants, analyzing how they developed more complex understandings of the climate and ecological crisis. The chapter identifies key design elements of the GA that facilitated these transformations, such as the use of pedagogical tools, collective readings, and the role of facilitators in conveying complex scientific concepts. The testimonies of invited witnesses who faced precarious situations due to climate change were particularly influential in shaping participants' understanding of justice and fairness in addressing the crisis. However, the chapter also identifies political vulnerabilities that affected participants' learning experiences. Individuals of advanced age, with lower levels of formal education, or with limited time for study faced disadvantages in accessing and processing the information provided by the GA. The personal networks of assembly members played a crucial role in mitigating these challenges. The chapter discusses the ambivalence of the GA's "classroom" environment, which both facilitated and hindered participants' engagement in different ways, underscoring the need for critical innovations in the integration of scientific information within democratic environments (Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970; Doerr, 2021).

Chapter 6 examined the deliberative journeys of GA participants, focusing on how they experienced and valued the process of mutual communication, reflection, and the creation of the People's Declaration. The chapter highlighted the development of *"empathetic reflexivity"* and a sense of political efficacy among participants, which contributed to their sustained engagement with the climate and ecological crisis (Bächtiger et al., 2018; Pateman, 1970; Dewey, 1939). These experiences were seen as democratically legitimate and transformative, fostering a sense of agency and commitment to political action.

The chapter also addressed the challenges and asymmetries within the deliberative process, such as disparities in education, social status, fluency in English, and access to technology. These factors created deliberative disadvantages for some participants, affecting their ability to contribute effectively. The analysis underscored the complexity of designing democratic innovations that are genuinely inclusive and effective, emphasizing the need for continuous evaluation and adaptation to address the diverse needs and vulnerabilities of participants.

Now, the thesis presents three key conclusions that emerged from the Grounded Theory framework used to analyze the GA. These conclusions are connected to critical debates within the field of democratic innovations and democratic theory: a) the interweaving of transformative democratic experiences and broader democracy; b) the complexity of the relationship between political vulnerabilities and democratic innovations; c) considerations for an ecological approach to democratic innovations.

a) Spill-over effects of GA's vital democratic experiences on democracies

As presented in the second part of this thesis and summarized earlier in this conclusion, I identified three main sets of transformative experiences that the GA fostered in its participants: (i) changes in their conditions of democratic appearance, recognition, and political identity; (ii) increased epistemic and political understanding of the climate emergency; and (iii) the development of empathetic reflexivity and a sense of political efficacy regarding the climate crisis. My qualitative analysis focused on how specific aspects of the GA—such as participant selection, learning tools, and deliberative conditions—contributed to these transformative experiences, aligning with the thesis's goal of understanding the impact of a global citizens' assembly from the participants' perspective.

However, I also found evidence that these vital experiences began to influence the democratic quality of participants' social relationships beyond the GA itself. This supports key theoretical claims from John Dewey (1939; 1946) and Carole Pateman (1970), who argue that

transformative democratic experiences, by reshaping subjectivities, also impact the democratic quality of individuals' everyday values and practices. In turn, this process helps spread democratic ways of life and fosters vibrant democracies from the bottom up. I refer to this process, where transformative democratic experiences in a democratic innovation reverberate across other social spheres and broader democracies, as "spill-over democratic effects." Conversely, I also identified political vulnerabilities that hinder this process from fully expanding and flourishing.

One notable spill-over democratic effect, briefly addressed in Chapter 4 when discussing transformations in assembly members' conditions of appearance, recognition, and political identity, was the phenomenon of some interviewees being recognized by non-participant citizens as their non-elected yet *"practical"* political representatives on climate and environmental issues. I use the term *"practical representatives"* because the mere fact of being selected, participating, and being publicly recognized as GA members was often enough to justify their status as spokespersons for the climate and ecological crisis. Their perspectives were deemed valuable and deserving of public consideration by their peers. This was evident, for instance, in the cases of Lee from Southeast Asia, Martha from Latin America, and Kemba from Southern Africa, who were invited to speak publicly about the climate crisis. Through these engagements, they translated their GA experiences for broader audiences, potentially reshaping how non-participants viewed the climate crisis, the value of political participation, citizens' assemblies, and democracy itself.

I also found evidence of spill-over democratic effects stemming from the interaction between participants' enhanced understanding of the scientific and political dimensions of the climate crisis (Chapter 5) and their developed sense of political competence and efficacy during the deliberative journey (Chapter 6). According to Pateman, this sense of efficacy motivates individuals to strive to improve the democratic quality of all areas of their personal lives.

For example, in Chapter 4, I discussed Amina from Western Asia, who became a *"practical"* political representative within her English course. She not only shared her GA experiences with classmates but also brought their perspectives and questions back to the assembly. Similar spill-over democratic effects likely occurred among many other assembly members, influencing their families and social networks. Maria from Latin America, for instance, shared that she never missed an opportunity to discuss the political causes of climate-related disasters with her bosses and restaurant customers following heavy rain incidents in her city. Princesa from Central Africa described how, during the last elections in her country, she actively debated with her street market customers, highlighting candidates' stances on the

climate crisis as a crucial voting consideration. Martha, also from Latin America, revealed that she now dedicates her retirement to engaging with local environmental movements, promoting recycling, and fostering new relationships with the environment. Another significant spill-over effect emerged from Priya in Southeast Asia, who challenged her brother-in-law's perception of her political role, asserting her right as a woman to participate in political events like the GA. These are just a few examples, and it is likely that many more spill-over democratic effects existed but were not captured due to the limited scope of interviews conducted.

While I identified several spill-over democratic effects stemming from participants' vital GA experiences, this thesis did not aim to investigate the full extent of these proliferation processes or their long-term consequences in participants' communities. Nevertheless, documenting their existence reinforces the theoretical propositions of John Dewey on creative democracy and Carole Pateman on participatory democracy. It also highlights the need for future research to explore democratic innovations as experiential phenomena that emerge within specific contexts but reverberate beyond them. This *"second life"* of democratic participation, so to speak, is crucial for sustaining democracy. However, I also identified two key political obstacles that limit the continuation and expansion of these spill-over democratic effects over time.

The first obstacle, which I term *environmental*, emerged from Maria's interview. While Maria initially felt motivated to share her GA experiences with her bosses and clients, she observed growing apathy and disinterest from her interlocutors. Additionally, the lack of political responsiveness from her representatives concerning the climate crisis diminished her sense of political efficacy. Ultimately, Maria concluded that while democratic innovations can profoundly transform the individuals who participate in them, their broader societal impact may be limited unless political participation opportunities are multiplied across society.

The second obstacle surfaced in interviews with community members connected to Kemba from Southeastern Africa. Although Kemba's GA participation had initially reverberated within his community—through local radio programs and citizen assemblies held alongside the GA—these connections were abruptly severed after the GA ended. Community members had no information about the achievements of the People's Declaration at the international level or any ongoing GA-related initiatives. This disconnection led to disengagement and diminished motivation to continue disseminating the transformative experiences of the GA. However, these community members also proposed ideas for future engagement, such as installing screens in public spaces like schools and squares to broadcast

deliberative events, allowing more citizens to participate indirectly by submitting questions and reflections to the assembly.

In summary, the spill-over effects of transformative democratic experiences—whether generated through digital platforms or global-scale democratic innovations—do exist and reach the everyday lives of individuals within democracies. However, more research is needed to understand the conditions that enable these effects to reverberate and their long-term impact.

b) Democratic innovations and vulnerabilities: a complex interaction

One of the most important theoretical propositions empirically operationalized in this thesis was the development of a framework to critically understand how diverse and often adverse conditions of political participation influence not only the opportunities for citizens to experience transformative democratic moments but also the very democratic qualities of participatory innovations. Theories of vulnerability were instrumental in this pursuit, prompting me to consider that while human vulnerability—understood as the inherent capacity to affect and be affected, or the condition of experiencing—is universal, it manifests as distinct political vulnerabilities depending on the physical, social, and environmental conditions experienced by individuals and social groups. In this sense, it is expected that the design conditions and demands of a political environment like the GA would produce varied consequences for participants based on their interactions with their bodies, sociodemographic markers, and living conditions.

By applying this framework through Grounded Theory analysis of the interviews, which constituted the primary data for this thesis, I arrived at several important conclusions. These findings highlight the need to complexify both the design and analysis of mechanisms intended to foster inclusivity and parity of participation in democratic innovations.

Firstly, political vulnerabilities—and the respective disadvantages and participatory harms they produce in interaction with the design and demands of democratic innovations—vary at each stage of the process.

From the random selection of participants to the choice of reference materials during the GA's learning phase, and the forms of linguistic performance prioritized in deliberations, each element can interact negatively with the political vulnerabilities that citizens already face in their lives. Thus, the idea of an *invulnerable* democratic innovation is not only unattainable but perhaps not even desirable. Instead, the best approach may lie in mapping the trade-offs and paradoxes inherent in design choices, involving both organizers and diverse citizens to assess potential impacts and mitigate severe issues. Engaging a wide range of stakeholders allows for

a more comprehensive evaluation of these dynamics, contributing to more inclusive and equitable democratic practices.

Secondly, if practitioners and researchers focus solely on sociodemographic markers—such as age, gender, or socioeconomic status—as indicators of disadvantage without considering their intersections and the lived experiences of participants, much will be overlooked. Throughout the analysis, it became evident that the intersection of social markers—such as age, gender, financial status, and education—significantly influenced participation parity within the GA. Additionally, the environmental and sociopolitical contexts in which participants engaged with the GA—contexts shaped by war, urban violence, neoliberalism, patriarchy, and environmental crises—further affected their vulnerabilities and challenges. Participants navigated numerous constraints, from working night shifts before attending morning sessions to managing childcare responsibilities or traveling long distances to access basic digital resources. These findings underscore the importance of rejecting a homogenized view of assembly members. Instead, democratic innovations must strive to understand and engage with each participant's unique circumstances to create genuinely inclusive and effective processes.

Thirdly, even when participants face disadvantages, their involvement in democratic innovations can foster resilience and creative adaptation. Monitoring these dynamics can provide valuable insights for both current and future initiatives.It was inspiring to observe that many participants managed to mitigate the obstacles they encountered through informal support networks, relying on family and friends. Recognizing the potential of these networks, democratic innovations might benefit from intentionally incorporating them into participatory processes. For example, understanding that some assembly members depended on their children to help them study GA materials raises the question: how can this interaction be designed to benefit both the participants and those indirectly involved? Acknowledging and leveraging existing social support systems can enhance both the inclusivity and effectiveness of democratic innovations.

Fourthly, even the most sophisticated mechanisms designed to address political vulnerabilities can inadvertently create dependencies, unforeseen disadvantages, or new forms of harm—issues that require continuous monitoring, adaptation, and intervention. One of the GA's most innovative and effective features was the decentralization of participant support through community hosts and translators. However, excessive decentralization risks increasing the discretionary power of intermediaries, potentially leaving participants overly dependent on individuals who may lack the capacity—or the motivation—to fulfill their roles effectively.

This dynamic highlights the importance of maintaining direct lines of communication between organizers and participants, ensuring that participants can gradually build autonomy within the process. Strategies such as incorporating more visual learning materials, reducing the reliance on translation, or diversifying deliberative formats to include artistic, visual, and physical expressions can empower participants, fostering resilience while mitigating the risks associated with excessive reliance on intermediaries.

Fifthly, democratic innovations must also consider the political vulnerabilities they may inadvertently perpetuate even after their formal conclusion. One particularly surprising—and concerning—finding was that many participants could not recall the content of the People's Declaration, the GA's main output, just three months after the event. Additionally, participants reported feeling disconnected and disregarded due to the lack of feedback regarding the GA's impact and future developments. This sense of disconnection risks undermining the vital shifts in political recognition and efficacy that the GA had initially fostered. Even when the formal relationship between a democratic innovation and its participants must end, this transition should be managed with care, acknowledging the emotional and political investments individuals have made. Failure to do so can erode the democratic gains achieved during the participatory process and dampen participants' motivation to remain civically engaged.

In summary, understanding that equality and integrity in democratic innovations are not fixed goals to be achieved but dynamic conditions that must be continually tested, adapted, and reimagined across different contexts and timeframes is essential. As Jacques Rancière (2004, p. 30) proposes, democracy itself is a perpetual "test," requiring constant interrogation, reflection, and transformation. This perspective offers a path toward a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between political vulnerabilities and democratic innovations—an understanding that is crucial for advancing both the theory and practice of participatory democracy.

c) For an ecological approach to democratic innovations

On another occasion, I had the opportunity to discuss with esteemed colleagues the need for an ecological approach to deliberative democracy to advance the current systemic paradigm (Mendonça et al., 2024). Nevertheless, I conclude this thesis by reflecting on the necessity and possibilities of also developing an ecological approach to the concept and practice of democratic innovations more broadly—beyond those limited to deliberation.

In summary, as Isabelle Stengers (2010) suggests, an ecological science of politics differs from the experimental model by analyzing phenomena without isolating the

relationships and variables among the different constitutive components of the case in question. In contrast to reductionist approaches, the ecological perspective, as Guattari (2005) also points out, seeks to understand the conditions under which completely heterogeneous sets of subjectivities, corporealities, and social constructs or assemblages establish more or less symbiotic, parasitic, or predatory relationships.

Participants in democratic innovations continue to be affected, constrained, empowered, and transformed by the networks of relationships they are part of outside the assembly events, as well as by the new networks they weave during and after the co-construction of political outputs—whether in the form of recommendations or public policies with legislative power. In this sense, democratic innovations have always interacted with and influenced various scales and dimensions of the sociopolitical universe. This interaction opens possibilities for democratic innovations to be enhanced by these networks or, conversely, to be at the mercy of complex and uncontrollable external factors.

For transnational democratic innovations to be fully enriched by the sociopolitical ecology of their participants, they must move beyond universal and standardized models of citizen participation. Meta-deliberation—or, at the very least, prior research with citizens, activists, and specialists from diverse contexts—is crucial to identify mechanisms capable of mitigating the effects of intense sociopolitical conditions such as war, urban violence, neoliberalism, patriarchy, systemic racism, and poverty on the lives and performance of assembly members (cf. Della Porta, 2015; Curato, 2019; Banerjee, 2022; Drake, 2023). Decolonizing citizens' assemblies requires the co-creation of hybrid, adaptive ecological designs that respond to these situated and structural challenges.

In my view, the GA organizers, when they sought to connect the main GA events with smaller local assemblies and promoted a global cultural wave by inviting artists worldwide to engage non-participating citizens, began to outline the idea of a democratic innovation informed by an ecological paradigm. But what if every process within a democratic innovation were conceived entirely through an ecological approach?

- What if, instead of selecting individuals and disconnecting them from their communities to participate in the GA, participation was designed to be networked and community-based?
- Could democratic innovations be designed to undergo constant metamorphosis—where the ideal format, number of deliberative rooms, methods of translating scientific knowledge, and discursive practices were not predetermined but continuously adapted in response to the vulnerabilities and transformations experienced by participants?

- Furthermore, how can the ecology of relationships established through a citizens' assembly remain active and vibrant, continuing to inspire new projects and forms of collective action even after the main events have concluded—ensuring that the spill-over democratic effects of transformative experiences continue to reverberate across different spaces and times?

In conclusion, rather than offering fixed recommendations, I raise more questions about what democratic innovations guided by an ecological paradigm could become. After all, as John Dewey (1939; 1946) reminds us, the experimentation with new ways to engage citizens in addressing collective problems should never cease. Societies completely invulnerable to the emergence of new collective problems are either idealizations born from disenchantment or disillusionment with human potential—*sad passions*—or they are experiences that have already reached fulfillment. And I, for one, hope we still have a long way to go.

d) Limits of the research and future agenda

This Grounded Normative and Experiential Theory on the first Global Assembly (GA) raised a series of issues, processes, and qualitative relationships that could not be fully explored within the scope of this thesis. However, the primary goal was to construct an interpretive framework and grounded theoretical propositions that can guide future research and inform the implementation of similar experiences, as well as serve as a basis for comparison with other cases. One of the major limitations of this analysis was the exclusion of experiences and vulnerabilities of participants from the Global North, due to both a specific political-methodological focus and resource constraints. Nevertheless, the theoretical expectation of prioritizing interviews with the potentially most vulnerable participants was well met, providing rich insights into the intersections of vulnerability and democratic participation.

To build on these findings, two key research directions should be pursued: a) The first would involve analyzing the processes and vulnerabilities identified in this study in relation to the concrete deliberative interactions that took place within the GA. This approach would deepen the understanding of how specific deliberative dynamics influenced participants' experiences, political efficacy, and the development of democratic capacities. b) The second would expand outward to better map the broader impacts of the GA—examining how it influenced participants' communities, shaped global governance processes, and contributed to public sphere discussions on climate issues. This line of inquiry would help assess the spill-over democratic effects of the GA, exploring how transformative democratic experiences resonate beyond the confines of the assembly itself.

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APPENDIX A: GLOBAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Biographical Information

1. Before we talk about the Global Assembly, we'd like to get to know you first. What do you do for a living? Can you describe a typical day at work or home?
   1.1. How did participating in the Global Assembly impact your daily life?
   1.2. What time were the breakout sessions? What would you normally be doing at that time?
2. How would you describe your current economic situation? Would you say you earn just enough, more than enough, or not enough to meet your daily needs? Can you tell us more about this?
3. Before the Assembly, were you already familiar with the topic of the climate emergency?
4. Do you experience the effects of the climate emergency in your daily life?

Most Memorable Part of the Global Assembly

5. More than three months have passed since the Global Assembly concluded. Can you recall your most memorable experience during the Assembly?
6. When you talk to your friends or family about taking part in the Assembly, what do you usually tell them?

Preparing for the Global Assembly

7. Can you recall how you were selected to join the Assembly?
   7.1. How did being selected make you feel?
   7.2. Did you have any doubts or hesitations before agreeing to participate?
   7.3. What convinced you to join?
   7.4. Did you have a community host or a translator?
   7.5. How did your community host or translator explain your role in the Assembly?
   7.6. Can you describe your relationship with your translator and community host?

8. What kind of preparations did you make before participating in the Assembly?
   8.1. Did you receive an information booklet from the organizing team?
   8.2. Did your community host provide any support in understanding the information booklet?
   8.3. Tell us about your experience reading the information packet. When did you read it? What were you doing before or after reading it? How much time did you spend on it? *(For interviewers: We want details. We want to unpack the participants' everyday experiences.)*
   8.4. How do you think the information packet could be improved? Do you have any suggestions?

9. Let's talk about the role of technology in the Global Assembly. Was this your first experience with video calls in a large group? What was the experience like?
   9.1. What devices did you use? *(Be specific: Laptop, cellphone—mention the model if possible.)*
   9.2. How did you connect to the internet?

9.3. Did you receive any technical support from your community host? *(e.g., provided headphones, microphone, etc.)*
9.4. The Global Assembly used different tools such as the Miro Board, WhatsApp, and images. Did you find these useful? How could they be improved?

During the Assembly

10. We'd now like to hear about your experiences during the Assembly, particularly your experience learning about the climate and ecological emergency. What was the most memorable thing you learned?
    10.1. From whom did you learn the most? *(Experts, fellow participants?)*
    10.2. What kind of information did you find most useful for deliberation?

11. You heard from many experts during the Assembly. What stands out most from that experience?
    11.1. Can you describe your learning style? Did you take notes, or did you just listen?
    11.2. What were the challenges of learning from experts?
    11.3. Most of the expert testimonies were in English. How did this affect your learning?
    11.4. How do you think this could be improved?
    11.5. What did you do when certain concepts were unclear? Did you conduct personal research between sessions?
12. Do you remember any moments of disagreement among participants during deliberative sessions? If so, can you describe what happened?
13. Can you describe your relationship with your fellow participants? How about your relationship with the Assembly team, including facilitators and notetakers?

14. Let's discuss the **People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth.** To what extent do you see your views reflected in this statement?
    14.1. To what extent did the insights you gained from the Global Assembly shape the content of the declaration?

After the Assembly
15. Now that the Assembly has ended, what are you most proud of as an Assembly member?

16. Have you applied any lessons from the Assembly in your daily life? This could be related to climate change or even to citizen participation in general.

17. If the Global Assembly were to happen again in the future, what kind of support should the organizers provide to people from disadvantaged backgrounds?

APPENDIX B: GLOBAL ASSEMBLY CLUSTER FACILITATORS AND COMMUNITY HOSTS INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Biographical Information

1. Before we discuss the Global Assembly, we'd like to get to know you first. What do you do for a living?
   1.1. How were you selected to join the Global Assembly?

2. Like other Cluster Facilitators, you probably attended several planning meetings with the Global Assembly team before the deliberative events began. During these meetings, the GA may have presented the roles and responsibilities expected from your organization. Do you remember these meetings? Can you list the roles and responsibilities assigned to your organization? *(e.g., recruiting Community Hosts (CHs), processing payments, assisting CHs with paperwork.)*
   2.1. When these roles and responsibilities were proposed to your organization, did you anticipate that any of them would be particularly complex or difficult to perform?
   2.2. How did your organization need to structure itself to fulfill these responsibilities? *(For example, hiring employees, purchasing new equipment, etc.)*
   2.3. We imagine that carrying out these responsibilities came with challenges and lessons. Can you share any experiences?

3. After this initial phase of adapting and structuring your organization to align with the GA's design, the first task was the recruitment of Community Hosts. What were the challenges and lessons learned during this recruitment phase?

4. Let's now reflect on some aspects of the Global Assembly itself. Were you able to attend any of the GA's breakout sessions?
   4.1. Thinking about memorable moments, were there any processes or events that particularly stood out to you?
   4.2. Do you think socio-economic or cultural asymmetries hindered some participants' ability to engage while making it easier for others? *(e.g., speaking time, ability to express disagreement, etc.)*

5. Now, thinking about Delibera's procedural role—what kind of responsibilities did you undertake during the GA?
   5.1. Did you notice if social, economic, or political disadvantages made it difficult for any participants to stay engaged throughout the process? Can you recall a situation where a participant was at risk of dropping out?

6. Were there other institutions, like Delibera Brasil, coordinating different participant clusters? If so, did you interact with them or attend any joint meetings?
   6.1. Reflecting on those meetings, did you notice any differences between the challenges your organization faced compared to others? *(e.g., conflict-related challenges, political contexts, etc.)*

7. Another key role that Cluster Facilitators played was receiving information from the GA and relaying it to Community Hosts or Assembly Members. Were there any challenges in performing this role? What lessons did you learn?
   7.1. Do you have any suggestions for improving how information is shared within the Global Assembly to better facilitate communication, comprehension, and engagement for CHs and AMs?

8. Did the Global Assembly request your support in publicizing the deliberative events and promoting AM participation in the media or on social networks?
   8.1. If so, what were the challenges and lessons learned in connecting the Global Assembly with the broader public sphere?
   8.2. Do you think the GA's outreach efforts—including its media presence, engagement with social networks, and connections with institutions—were effective? What could be improved?
   8.3. In some interviews I've conducted, I've noticed that certain participants gained more public recognition and visibility. Some were interviewed by the media, met with politicians, or even received awards in their communities. Have you heard of any such cases?
   8.4. What do you think enables some AMs to connect more successfully with the media, political institutions, or civil society organizations?
   8.5. What about the Global Assembly's relationship with your organization? What were the strengths and weaknesses of your interaction with the GA?

9. One of the main goals of the Global Assembly was to produce the **People's Declaration**, which was presented at COP-26. What did you think of this outcome? Do you believe the Global Assembly could have delivered something different or better?

   10. Did the GA provide any guidance or recommendations on maintaining contact with participants after the breakout sessions ended?
   10.1. Do you have any recommendations for improving future GA events?

APPENDIX C: GLOBAL ASSEMBLY DELIVERY TEAM INTERVIEW SCRIPT

1. Organizers' Role & Intentions

1.1 What was the interviewee’s specific role in the Global Assembly?

1.2 What were the primary objectives of the Assembly from an organizational perspective?

1.3 How did they define success for the Assembly?

2. Process Design & Implementation

2.1 What principles or frameworks guided the design of the Global Assembly?

2.2 How were participant selection and diversity ensured?

2.3 What strategies were used to maintain fairness, inclusion, and representativity?

2.4 Were there any significant changes made to the process during implementation?

3. Logistical & Technological Challenges

3.1 What logistical or technological hurdles did the organizers face?

3.2 How did they handle time zones, digital divides, and language barriers?

3.3 Were there unforeseen difficulties in ensuring meaningful participation?

4. Deliberation & Facilitation

4.1 What methods were used to facilitate high-quality deliberation?

4.2 Did organizers feel that the discussions remained inclusive and balanced?

4.3 Were there instances of power imbalances or dominant voices affecting deliberation?

4.4 How were disagreements and tensions managed?

5. Inclusion & Political Vulnerabilities

5.1 Did organizers perceive certain groups as more vulnerable or marginalized in the process?

5.2 Were there any difficulties in engaging Global South participants equitably?

5.3 Did they take specific measures to mitigate power disparities?

6. Impact & Perceived Effectiveness

6.1 What do organizers believe was the most impactful outcome of the Assembly?
6.2 How did they assess the influence of the Assembly's recommendations?
6.3 Were there signs of political uptake or institutional recognition of the Assembly's results?

7. Lessons Learned & Future Recommendations

7.1 What aspects of the Global Assembly worked particularly well?
7.2 What would they change if they were to organize a similar initiative again?
7.3 Do they believe citizens' assemblies should become a more institutionalized part of global governance?