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Executive summary

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Africa faces a paradox. Most people continue to support democratic institutions, even though their satisfaction is declining with institutions' ability to deliver inclusive economic prosperity and accountable, responsive governance. Citizens' assemblies offer a way forward by offering the opportunity to draw on indigenous traditions of sustained deliberation and consensus-building to tackle complex policy problems.

In this paper, **we explore how citizens' assemblies can be adapted to Africa's diverse contexts by drawing on real-world experiences across the continent.** We begin by outlining the civic strengths and cultural traditions that underpin deliberative democracy in Africa, before reviewing emerging deliberative experiments – including citizens' assemblies – that illustrate their potential. We introduce an analytical framework to assess the strengths and limitations of citizens' assemblies and apply it to **case studies from Mali, Malawi, and The Gambia.** Finally, we highlight insights from an upcoming citizens' assembly in South Africa.

The paper serves two purposes: advancing theoretical frameworks for evaluating deliberative processes in the Global South, and offering practical guidance to foster experimentation and collaboration in democratic innovation across these contexts. Rather than proposing a single model, we identify context-sensitive strategies that help citizens' assemblies bridge Africa's democratic delivery gap, while building on longstanding traditions of collective decision making.
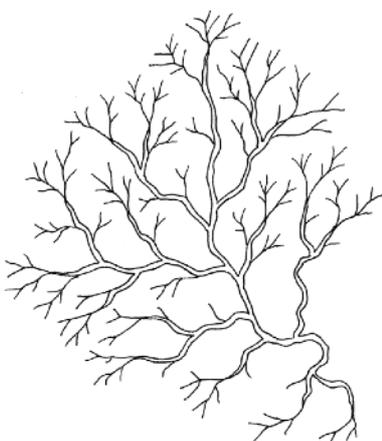
Deliberation and democracy in Africa

'Deliberation' refers to structured discussion where people consider evidence, listen to different perspectives, and work together to understand complex issues before reaching a shared decision. Unlike other forms of political participation (e.g., voting, lobbying, protesting), deliberation involves genuine openness to changing one's mind based on new information and insights from a range of different arguments and opinions (DemocracyNext, 2025; OECD, 2020).

Deliberative democracy puts thorough and constructive discussion about complex issues at the centre of decision making. Rather than simply aggregating citizens' preferences through voting, deliberative democracy creates spaces where assembly members can learn about issues, hear from experts and affected communities, discuss trade-offs with their peers, and develop informed recommendations through facilitated deliberation. As a result, these processes often lead to more nuanced, creative, and widely acceptable solutions than traditional forms of political participation – especially when addressing complex, contentious, or divisive issues (Bächtiger et al., 2018).

Africa has unique advantages for deliberative democracy that remain largely untapped. For generations, indigenous consensus-building traditions have provided platforms for community debate and collective decision making.

Deliberative democracy is therefore not a foreign import, but builds on deeply rooted principles and practices in many parts of the continent.

Top left: A bantaba is a traditional community meeting place in The Gambia (and across West Africa) Top right: Salima citizen assembly members. Bottom left and right: North Bank Region Citizens' Assembly, The Gambia.

Analysis framework

The analysis framework organises our assessment criteria into three interconnected phases that capture the complete lifecycle of a citizens' assembly:

1. **Phase 1:** Designing the structural foundations for inclusive deliberation;

2. **Phase 2:** Process implementation quality and outputs; and

3. **Phase 3:** Impact of broader democratic effects and long-term consequences.

Each phase addresses distinct but complementary dimensions of assembly effectiveness. Together, they create a systematic approach to understanding both assembly member experiences and wider democratic outcomes.

Design

Design fundamentals
— Purpose, mandate, and question framing
— Governance structures and independence
— Timeline and pacing

Representation
— Sortition process
— Demographic representation
— Youth and gender participation

Resource and capacity constraints
— Budget optimisation
— Local capacity utilisation
— Infrastructure and logistical adaptations

Process

Information and learning environment
— Balanced information
— Participant-driven inquiry
— Linguistic and cultural accessibility

Participation and deliberation principles
— Equal opportunity
— Agency recognition
— Culturally-appropriate facilitation

Recommendation development and quality
— Comprehensiveness, coherence, innovation
— Evidence base
— Balance of consensus and minority views

Impact

Participant learning and empowerment
— Civic efficacy and democratic skills
— Perspective change and continued engagement
— Community-level outcomes

Public transparency and engagement
— Transparency
— Proactive media engagement
— Accessibility

Policy influence and implementation
— Government response and uptake
— Implementation tracking
— Integration with broader consultation processes

Case studies

We apply our analytical framework to three case studies that span different African contexts and deliberative approaches. The first, Mali's Espace Citoyen d'Interpellation Démocratique (Citizen's Space for Democratic Deliberation, or ECID), convened local farmers in 2006 to deliberate on the proposed introduction of genetically modified organisms (GMOs) into Malian agriculture. The second case, the Citizens' Juries held in Salima District in 2020, addressed citizen preferences on local resource allocation (constituency development funds) in Malawi. Lastly, the 2025 North Bank Region Citizens' Assembly in Kerewan, The Gambia illustrates the use of community-based deliberation to address sustainable natural resource governance in the face of climate change.

These cases vary in geography (West and Southern Africa), political systems (Mali's democratic pre-coup democratic period, Malawi's consolidated multiparty democracy, and The Gambia's post-authoritarian transition), issue areas (agriculture, public finance, climate resilience), and scale (district-level to regional). The time span from 2006 to 2025 also allows us to examine how deliberative processes have evolved. The contextual variation enables comparative analysis that can yield practical insights for designing context-appropriate citizens' assemblies in diverse African settings.

The case studies also include a mix of examples at varying stages in the deliberative lifecycle – from fully completed events (Mali, Malawi) to the early stages of the impact phase (The Gambia). This temporal diversity requires us to be flexible in how we apply the analysis framework. Some cases illuminate design integrity and preparatory processes, while others provide insights into deliberative quality, recommendation development, or longer-term democratic impacts.

North Bank Region Citizens' Assembly members and organising team, Kerewan, The Gambia.

Table 2: Citizens' assemblies in Africa

	Espace Citoyen d'Interpellation Démocratique (ECID)	Espaces Citoyen d'Interpellation Démocratique sur la Gouvernance de la Recherche sur l'Agriculture et l'Alimentation₂	Salima District Citizens' Juries	North Bank Region Citizens' Assembly, Kerewan	Pilot citizens' assembly
Country	Mali	Mali	Malawi	The Gambia	South Africa
Timing	25-29 January 2006	January and February 2010	June - December 2020	20-26 October 2025	2026*
Status	Completed	Completed	Completed	Completed	Design phase
Organiser(s)	Regional Assembly of Sikasso province	Local government of Sikasso	Salima District Council The newDemocracy Foundation	Great Green Wall Frontline DemocracyNext Civic	Centre for Research on Democracy (CREDO), Stellenbosch University
Geographic scope	Sikasso province	Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Senegal	Salima District	North Bank Region	Cape Town
Number of assembly members	45 farmers	85 farmers and food processors	100 residents (50 per assembly)	30 residents	100 residents
Question	The introduction of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs) (BT Cotton in particular) into Malian agriculture and the future of the sector	What kind of knowledge and agricultural research priorities do small scale producers and food processors want (or not)? How can we democratise the governance of food and agricultural research?	What should be done to make sure that the CDF funds are used transparently and in the public interest, and that decision-makers are held accountable?	How can we restore our lands and natural habitats, while creating better livelihoods, and economic empowerment?	TBD
Key informant interviews	M.P. Pimbert (Coventry University) P. Bryant (Shared Future)	M.P. Pimbert (Coventry University)	E. Msewa (Independent Consultant)	C. Gaye (GGWF) H. Terry (DemocracyNext) J. MacDonald-Nelson (DemocracyNext)	K. Alberts (CREDO)

₂ Citizen spaces for democratic dialogue on the governance of agricultural and food research.

Recommendations for advancing deliberative democracy in Africa

Regional frameworks provide normative support for deliberative democracy in Africa, with African Union instruments committing member states to promote popular participation, civil society engagement, and good governance (African Union, 2007; 2020; 2025). In principle, these commitments create space for innovations such as citizens' assemblies to complement representative institutions. In practice, however, weak implementation, low ratification rates, limited institutional capacity, and uneven political will continue to constrain translation of these norms into domestic governance reforms (Africa Center, 2025; European Parliament, 2022; UNDP, 2025). These conditions shape the opportunities and constraints faced by different stakeholders in advancing deliberative democracy.

Governments confront a fundamental tension between the democratic imperative to enable citizen participation and the political risks of empowering assemblies that may produce recommendations challenging existing policies or power structures. Organisers should therefore:

— **Secure commitments before assemblies convene** by identifying specific officials and agencies responsible for receiving and responding to recommendations.

— **Clarify how assemblies link to existing institutions**, ensuring deliberative processes complement rather than undermine representative authority.

— **Develop legal or procedural frameworks** that require formal responses to assembly outputs, even where implementation cannot be guaranteed.

— **Align deliberative agendas with administrative capacity**, avoiding mandates that span multiple ministries without coordination mechanisms.

Funders similarly navigate difficult trade-offs between their institutional imperatives (short funding cycles, pressure to demonstrate measurable impact) and the requirements for effective deliberative democracy. They should therefore:

— **Adopt longer funding horizons** that support institutionalisation rather than short-term pilots, recognising that policy impact often unfolds over many years.

— **Support adaptive, context-specific designs**, rather than privileging replication of Global North models.

— **Recognise civic inclusion and capacity-building as core impacts**, not only policy change, given the importance of engaging citizens excluded from formal governance spaces.

— **Provide post-assembly funding for follow-up**, including dissemination, advocacy, and monitoring, to strengthen implementation pathways.

Civil society organisations (CSOs) face the challenge of facilitating complex deliberative processes, conducting sustained advocacy, monitoring implementation, and building public awareness – all while operating with precarious funding, limited technical capacity, and competing demands from multiple donor-driven projects. CSO-led processes should therefore:

— **Form coalitions and regional networks** to pool facilitation skills, advocacy capacity, and learning, reducing the burden on individual organisations.

— **Integrate assemblies into ongoing programmes**, such as community organising or participatory governance initiatives, rather than treating them as standalone projects.

— **Invest in local facilitation capacity**, training community leaders and practitioners to reduce reliance on international consultants.

— **Partner with academic and research institutions** to support evaluation, documentation, and evidence-based advocacy with governments and funders.

Overall, our research and analysis suggest that deliberative democracy holds significant promise in African contexts, particularly where conventional channels of political representation are viewed as unresponsive.

However, durable democratic impact depends less on process design alone than on formal institutional embedding, sustained financial and organisational support, and political incentives to incorporate citizen input into policy cycles. Without these enabling conditions, democratic innovations risk remaining isolated experiments, valuable for learning and empowerment but insufficient to transform governance systems in the longer term.