

Proposal for the Formation of a Citizens Assembly Working Group

To be convened by the Centre for Research on Democracy (CREDO) at Stellenbosch University, initiated and co-chaired by Damien du Preez and Kira Alberts.

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The Centre for Research on Democracy (CREDO) is an interdisciplinary academic centre with a global reach dedicated to the study and promotion of democracy and its values. Established in 2021 at Stellenbosch University, CREDO nevertheless builds on a 25-year long history of studying democracy in South Africa in a global perspective and is strengthened by a team of academic experts on Africa, Southeast Asia, MENA, Latin America, Eastern and Western Europe. Disciplines represented within the centre include political science, international relations, economics, sociology, and history.

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1. Introduction

In response to the growing popularity of citizens assemblies worldwide as one of the potential solutions to the ongoing crisis of democracy, the Centre for Research on Democracy (CREDO) proposes the convening of a Citizens Assembly Working Group. Composed of South African and international scholars and practitioners, the aim of the group will be to study the relevance of citizens assemblies for the future of South African democracy and to prepare scholarly and practical outputs to guide the local development of the practice. To achieve this, it will be necessary to devise a South Africa-specific blueprint rather than copy a model developed in and for the Global North. Given the absence of local scholarship in the area the proposed working group stands to make a significant contribution to the field and the local development of democracy.

2. Background and Rationale

A citizens assembly (CA), also known as a deliberative mini public or citizen jury, is an innovative democratic practice originating from the field of deliberative democracy (Vrydagh, 2023). An assembly consists of a representative group of lay citizens who are randomly selected and gathered together over several days to learn about, deliberate on, and create recommendations for a policy issue affecting their community. Proponents of CAs argue that they provide an opportunity to engage everyday citizens, representing the diversity of interests and perspectives of the broader population, in democratic decision-making.

Scholars and practitioners of CAs elsewhere argue that several positive impacts may be generated by well-designed CAs, all of which have relevance for South African democracy.

- By including marginalised and diverse voices, CAs can improve the responsiveness of policymaking to minority preferences and thus improve the legitimacy of democratic decision-making (Jacquet et. al., 2021:135).
- Through the respectful sharing and deliberation of different viewpoints, CAs can build mutual understanding between participants and thus contribute to a decrease in polarisation (Nielsen et. al., 2023:129).
- By bringing together diverse groups of citizens with no prior relationships, CA deliberations can prevent the groupthink which is common among policymakers (Lindell, 2023:262).
- CAs give government bodies the opportunity to actively engage with citizens' recommendations and thus improve the political trust of participants and the wider public (Boulianne, 2019).

- Participation in a CA tends to generate greater political participation and interest among participants, creating more civic-minded citizens. (Jacquet et. al., 2021:135).
- Recommendations generated by CAs can be more progressive and long-termist than the traditional policy positions held by policymakers (Willis, 2022).
- Well-publicised CAs can influence wider public opinion, encouraging greater political literacy and interest in deliberative democratic practices (Goldberg, 2023:274).
- The transparency and accountability of CAs, which are at the centre of deliberative democratic practices such as CAs, may serve to expose and limit political self-interestedness and corruption (Young, 2000:35).

According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2020:35), the increasing popularity of CAs worldwide is contributing to a “deliberative wave,” with approximately 239 CAs having been convened as of 2019. Since 2011, CAs have become a regular mechanism of Ireland’s democratic process, with past CAs deliberating on issues such as gender inequality, climate change, and abortion. In 2021, the first Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis brought together 100 randomly selected citizens from around the world (Curato et. al., 2023). The European Union (EU) has also run several bloc-wide CAs (Demidov, 2023), with new proposals calling for the establishment of a permanent European Citizens Assembly in an effort to bridge the body’s supposed democratic deficit (Berg et. al., 2023).

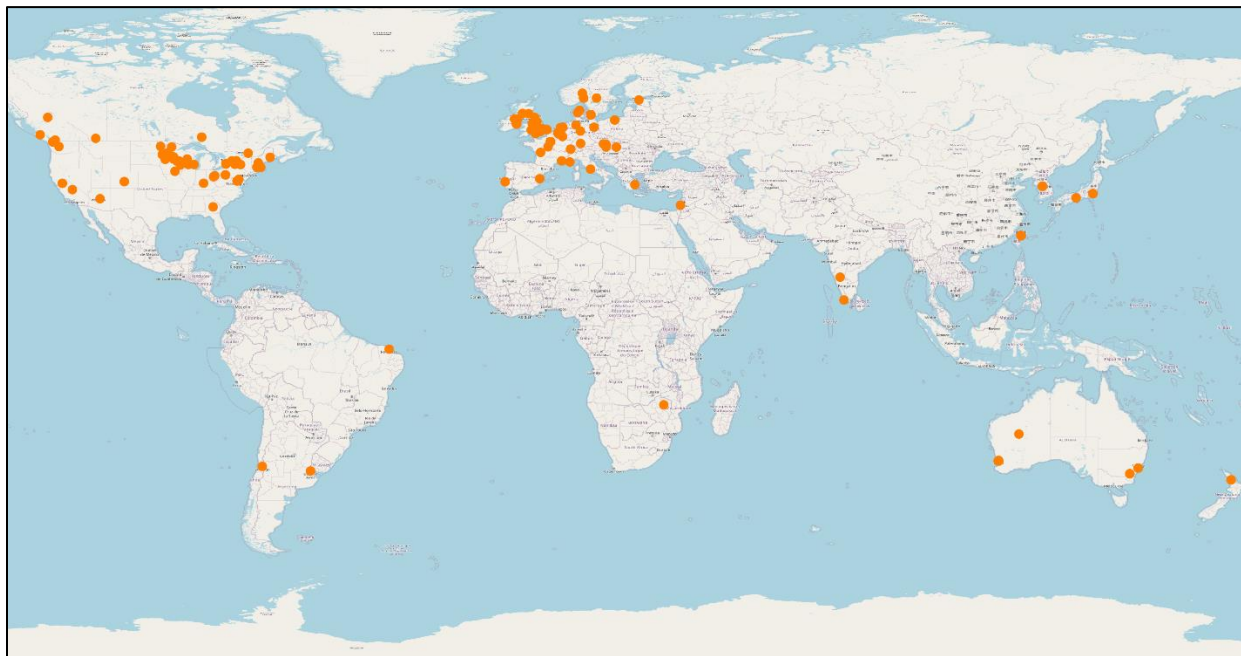


Figure 2.1. Map of Citizens Assemblies, Citizens Juries, and Consensus Conferences, as found in the Minipublics Database of Sayman and Hugel (2021).

This proposal thus calls for a concerted and long-term scholarly effort to study the relevance of CAs for the future of South African democracy and to prepare scholarly and practical outputs to guide the local development of the practice. While CAs are increasingly popular worldwide and promise significant positive impacts for South African democracy, serious shortcomings would likely emerge if practices developed in the Global North were to be applied to the unique cultural and political context of South Africa. Given this, and the lack of relevant local scholarship on the subject, the working group's efforts will emerge as a meaningful contribution to the study of citizens assemblies and the local development of this unique democratic innovation.

3. Problem Statement

Designing and convening impactful CAs is a complex task with each assembly requiring significant forethought and preparation. While there is great diversity in terms of the design and implementation of CAs, a number of ground rules have been put forward, as encapsulated by the influential "Assembling an Assembly Guide" (DemocracyNext, 2021). They centre around three core design features.

First, the participants of the assembly are randomly selected via a 'civic lottery' to be demographically representative of the community affected by the policy issue under question. Second, subject experts are brought in to guide participants in a structured learning process, during which the participants are informed about all aspects of the policy issue. This learning process informs the participants' subsequent deliberations, during which time they attempt to reach a shared judgement on the issue with the assistance of trained facilitators. Third, the participants' resulting judgement is translated into a formal recommendations report which is then submitted to a relevant governing body.

There are two further design features worth mentioning here. CAs can be convened at various scales, including the local (municipal), regional (provincial), national, or international level. A local CA would likely occupy thirty participants for five full days over a series of weekends while a national CA is likely to require at least one hundred people over multiple months. CAs tend to address policy issues which have a direct impact on a community and which a representative sample of the citizenry can be reasonably expected to deliberate on. Examples include urban planning, healthcare, the natural environment, public services, energy, electoral reform, and transport.

However, while existing literature and resources provide a comprehensive overview of the design, implementation, and impact of CAs in a variety of Global North cases, the same cannot be said for cases on the African continent. Questions that need answers relate to the scope (local vs national), the receptiveness of governing bodies to recommendations, the influence of corruption, multidimensional inequality and its effect on shared learning and deliberation, the democratic legitimacy of CA processes, a lack of local capacity and trained staff, the risk of undue influence, the interplay with existing democratic structures, and the

meaning of citizenship. In the case of South Africa, where little to no scholarly work on the implementation of CAs has been done, significant research is thus required to address these questions.

4. Initial Research Questions

Considering the lack of existing research on CAs in South Africa, much of the group's initial work will thus focus on conducting a wide-ranging review of the global CA literature and investigating a host of questions which emerge when considering the relevance of this Global North-developed model for the South Africa context. A small selection of these questions include:

- How might the implementation of CAs address the deterioration of South African democracy?
- What are the most popular frameworks which inform the design of CAs globally, and how well might these apply to the South African case?
- What is the relationship between CAs and existing democratic institutions, and how can CAs be designed to complement these institutions rather than hinder or replace them?
- Which cases of previous CAs are most relevant to the South African context, and what can be learnt from them?
- Given South Africa's complex political and economic environment, what are potential challenges to implementing the practice of CAs and how could these be accounted for?
- How do CAs and deliberative democracy more broadly relate to African traditional governance practices?
- How would a South African CA account for the country's multidimensional inequalities and diversity of languages?
- What mechanisms are required to ensure fair and equal access to participants (financial incentives, childcare, travel cost)?
- Which individuals are to be included within the definition of "citizenship" that determines the pool of individuals who are allowed to participate?
- How can a CA's organisers best shield participants from undue influence by lobby groups and other motivated actors?

5. Aim, Objectives, and Activities

Upon completion of the initial literature review, the working group will turn its attention to the generation of practical, accessible knowledge which can inform the future development of CAs in South Africa. The group's work will be directed towards six objectives:

Objectives of the Citizens Assembly Working Group	
Primary Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. To determine to what extent a CA would be suitable in South Africa's unique democratic environment, highlighting historical linkages to African traditional practices, potential challenges, and potential positive impacts. 2. To develop the first blueprint for a South African CA, outlining the unique design features and other considerations which should inform the implementation of the practice in South Africa. 3. To organise and evaluate South Africa's first pilot CA in collaboration with a local municipality, in order to test the blueprint under real-world conditions.
Secondary Objectives	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. To build capacity amongst South African researchers and practitioners in the study and implementation of CAs and other deliberative democratic practices. 5. To generate public interest in and discussion about CAs, deliberative democratic practices, and other democratic innovations. 6. To outline a research and practice agenda for the future development of CAs and other deliberative democratic practices in South Africa.

In pursuit of these goals, the group's work will centre around five activities:

Activities of the Citizens Assembly Working Group	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Carrying out a wide-ranging review of the CA literature, summarising the current state of knowledge globally as well as highlighting those insights and knowledge gaps which are most relevant to the South African context. 2. Conducting informal discussions and expert interviews with local stakeholders, including policymakers, government committee members, NGOs, and other civil society actors, gaining insight into the political landscape that must be accounted for. 	

3. Conducting discussions and expert interviews with notable scholars and practitioners from around the world, gaining direct insight into the study and practice of CAs in multiple global contexts.
4. Co-creating, by way of regular online meetings and in-person workshops, a series of outputs which communicate the group's findings in a practical and accessible manner.
5. Communicating the group's ongoing work to the general public, civil society, and policymakers by way of a dedicated webpage, media articles, media interviews, social media posts, and other efforts.

6. Group Composition and Collaborations

The working group will be composed of 8 to 10 members, consisting of South African scholars with relevant expertise as well as practitioners with experience in citizen engagement, group facilitation, advocacy, policy, or pedagogy. The inclusion of practitioners is intended to ground the group's research and analysis in the complex on-the-ground realities of South Africa, thus joining academic theorising with practical insight. The group will be co-chaired by Damien du Preez and Kira Alberts, under the supervision of Professor Ursula van Beek.

Based on an acknowledgment that the chances of success for any intellectual project are improved by the addition of diverse efforts and perspectives, this proposal recognises that opportunities exist to unlock beneficial synergies by collaborating with the various offices of Stellenbosch University, a selection of local stakeholders, and global experts.

With regards to Stellenbosch University, initial collaborative efforts will be focused through Professor Nico Koopman (Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Social Impact, Transformation and Personnel), Professor Sibusiso Moyo (Deputy Vice Chancellor: Research, Innovation and Postgraduate Studies), and the Corporate Communication and Marketing Division.

With regards to local stakeholders, initial collaborative efforts will be focused on mayoral committees in the Western Cape, the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, the Democracy Development Programme, the Institute for Race Relations, the Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung.

With regards to global experts, initial collaborative efforts will be focused on scholars and practitioners in the Global North and Global South who have a demonstrated track record of expertise in the study and organisation of CAs and deliberative democracy more broadly.

7. Timeline

TASK	Week 4		Week 5		Week 5		Week 6		Week 6		Week 7		Week 7		Week 8		Week 8		Week 9	
	22/01	26/01	29/01	02/02	05/02	09/02	12/02	17/02	19/02	23/02	26/02	01/03	04/03	08/03	11/03	15/03	18/03	22/03	25/03	29/03
Share proposal with CREDO colleagues for comment																				
Finalise proposal draft, incorporating CREDO feedback																				
Literature review																				
Send out proposal to local stakeholders, organising informal discussions Aim is to generate feedback to inform the initial approach of the working group.																				
Send out proposal to global scholars and practitioners, organising informal discussions. Aim is to generate feedback to inform the initial approach of working group																				
Hold informal discussions with local stakeholders as well as global scholars and practitioners																				
Reassess initial approach and timeline of working group, as set out in proposal, based on feedback and insights generated through informal discussions																				
Begin recruiting local scholars and practitioners for membership. Once group is (partially) assembled, begin process of allocating research duties and revising timeline																				

8. Communication of Results

This proposal recognises the critical importance of effective communication in disseminating research findings and fostering meaningful engagement with the academic community, policymakers, and civil society. To ensure the widespread dissemination of the working group's findings, a comprehensive communications plan is suggested that includes the publication of discussion papers, practical reports, scholarly articles, and presentations. Additionally, the working group will leverage various digital platforms, such as social media, webinars, and the CREDO webpage, to share accessible updates and solicit diverse feedback, making the group's work more accessible to a diverse audience. Lastly, the working group will partake in a number of media engagements, including op-ed writing and media interviews, to draw wider attention to the group's work and its relevance for South African democracy.

9. Suggested Media

Following is a selection of media coverage of citizens assemblies.

- [Article] [South Africa's Democracy Problem](#) (News24)
- [Article] [To redesign democracy, the U.S. should borrow an idea from Dublin](#) (Fast Company)
- [Article] [A Movement That's Quietly Reshaping Democracy For The Better](#) (Noema)
- [Article] [Citizens' Assemblies and Beyond](#) (Hannah Arendt Center)
- [Article] [Citizens' assemblies: are they the future of democracy?](#) (The Guardian)
- [Video] [Citizens Assembly on Community Waste Disposal in Francisco Morato, Brazil](#)
- [Video] [Citizens Assembly on Community Development Funds in Salima, Malawi](#)
- [Video] [Irish Citizens Assembly on Abortion](#)
- [Video] [Irish Citizens Assembly on Biodiversity Loss](#)
- [Video] [France's National Citizens Assembly on Climate Change](#)

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