HUMANITY PROJECT

A GUIDE TO POPULAR ASSEMBLIES

About Humanity Project

Humanity Project is a UK-wide grassroots movement bringing people together to listen, connect, and act on what matters most. At its heart is assembly culture – a new kind of people-led politics rooted in the right to be listened to.

It starts in our neighbourhoods but grows into something bigger – connecting communities across the country to tackle the challenges we can't solve alone. It's already happening, and it's changing what democracy can be.

www.humanityproject.uk
By us, for us, where we live.

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September 2025

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Love is the drive

towards the unity

of the separated

Paul Tillich

Introduction

Across the world, powerful groups have been trying to divide us and take away our rights for a long time. They talk a lot about “freedom,” but what they really want is to stop us from working together to make society fairer.

Small groups of rich and powerful people have been taking more and more control over our lives, while the rest of us lose our say in how society is run. Make no mistake: if things continue in this direction, we’ll all be worse off in almost every way – facing rising fascism, deepening poverty, and ecological collapse.

But there is another path. We can use the tools we already have to bring people together, to listen, to connect and to act. By realising our collective power, we can combat hatred and division and build something better.

This is a story about the struggle between two kinds of politics: the politics of division, and the politics of unity. Popular assemblies are one of the most powerful tools we have in that struggle – a way for communities to meet, deliberate, and act together.

Who this guide is for, and how to use it:

This handbook is written first and foremost for organisers – people who want to bring assemblies to life in their communities. You don’t need any prior experience. Whether you’re part of a local group, a campaign, or just a few neighbours coming together, this guide is designed to help you.

The first sections offer background and context: where assemblies come from, why they matter, and what makes them powerful.

The later sections are practical: step-by-step tools and examples you can use to design, run, and follow up on assemblies.

Think of this as both inspiration and instruction – a resource you can dip into for ideas and return to as your assemblies grow. Above all, it’s an invitation: to listen, connect, and act together.

1 Beyond Elections

Around the world, we equate democracy with elections. However, democracy means much more than that: ***rule by the people***. Yet, according to most people around the world, elections just lead to rule by a powerful few, while we get sidelined (Lerner, 2024). This is supported by research that indicates that elections often produce…
(Guerrero, 2023)

- **Ignorance and Capture** – Ordinary people rarely have the time or resources to fully grasp the complex issues at stake in elections. This makes it easier for powerful groups — such as corporations and lobbyists — to capture politics and shape outcomes in their favour.

- **Information and Distortion** – Even when people want to make informed choices, the information environment is flooded with spin, half-truths, and deliberate distortions. Politicians, the media, and vested interests all compete to frame reality in ways that benefit them, leaving voters struggling to separate fact from manipulation.

- **Division** – Elections often pit groups against one another, encouraging "us vs. them" thinking rather than fostering dialogue or common ground. This divisive dynamic undermines cooperation and makes it harder to solve shared problems.

- **Short-Termism and Elitism** – Because elections revolve around short cycles and are dominated by the wealthy and well-connected, leaders prioritise quick wins and elite interests over the long-term needs of ordinary people. The result is a political system that sidelines the majority while entrenching the power of a few.

What's more, elected governments are increasingly reshaping and exploiting elections to further push for rule by a small elite who then rule over the rest of us (Lerner, 2024). So, it is hardly surprising that most people in countries that have elections worldwide say that their political system "needs major changes or needs to be completely reformed" (Pew Research Centre, 2021). To build a real democracy that actually works for us, we must urgently put our voices back at the centre.

2 Origins of Participatory Democracy

"The holding of assemblies of elders, fighting men, or people of a tribe, community, or city to make decisions or render opinions on important matters is doubtless a custom older than history"

- Robert & Others

Making decisions collectively is the most ordinary thing in the world: take, for example, a group of friends deciding what to film to see in the cinema. The formal term for this practice is **participatory democracy**. We can also use it to refer to a form of government where we 'directly' have a say in political decisions and policies that affect our lives, rather than through elected politicians (called 'Representative Democracy').

Unsurprisingly, people have made decisions this way for most of human history. Even records of the earliest known urban communities in Mesopotamia (now called Iraq) (4,000 BC) suggest that they ruled themselves in this way (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021). Other well-known examples of highly developed structures of participatory government amongst many that exist in the history books include sortition-based assemblies in Athens (6th - 4th c. BC), Panchayats in India (6th c. BC), Folkmoots of Medieval Northern Europe (7th - 8th c.), confederated councils of the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy (around 12th c.) of so-called North America and Canada, and the Gadaa system of the Oromo people in present-day Ethiopia and Kenya (c. 16th c. or earlier). The point is that despite this ancient and varied history, participatory democracy has been eclipsed by representative democracy over the past few centuries across most of the world and so the word 'democracy' has come to mean 'holding elections'.

3 Popular Assemblies

Popular Assemblies (also known as 'Peoples' Assemblies') are one type of participatory democracy. They are also a type of **deliberative democracy**, which is a way of making decisions through collective dialogue.

Popular Assemblies are similar to citizens assemblies but differ in two fundamental ways: how participants are chosen, and who tends to sponsor them.

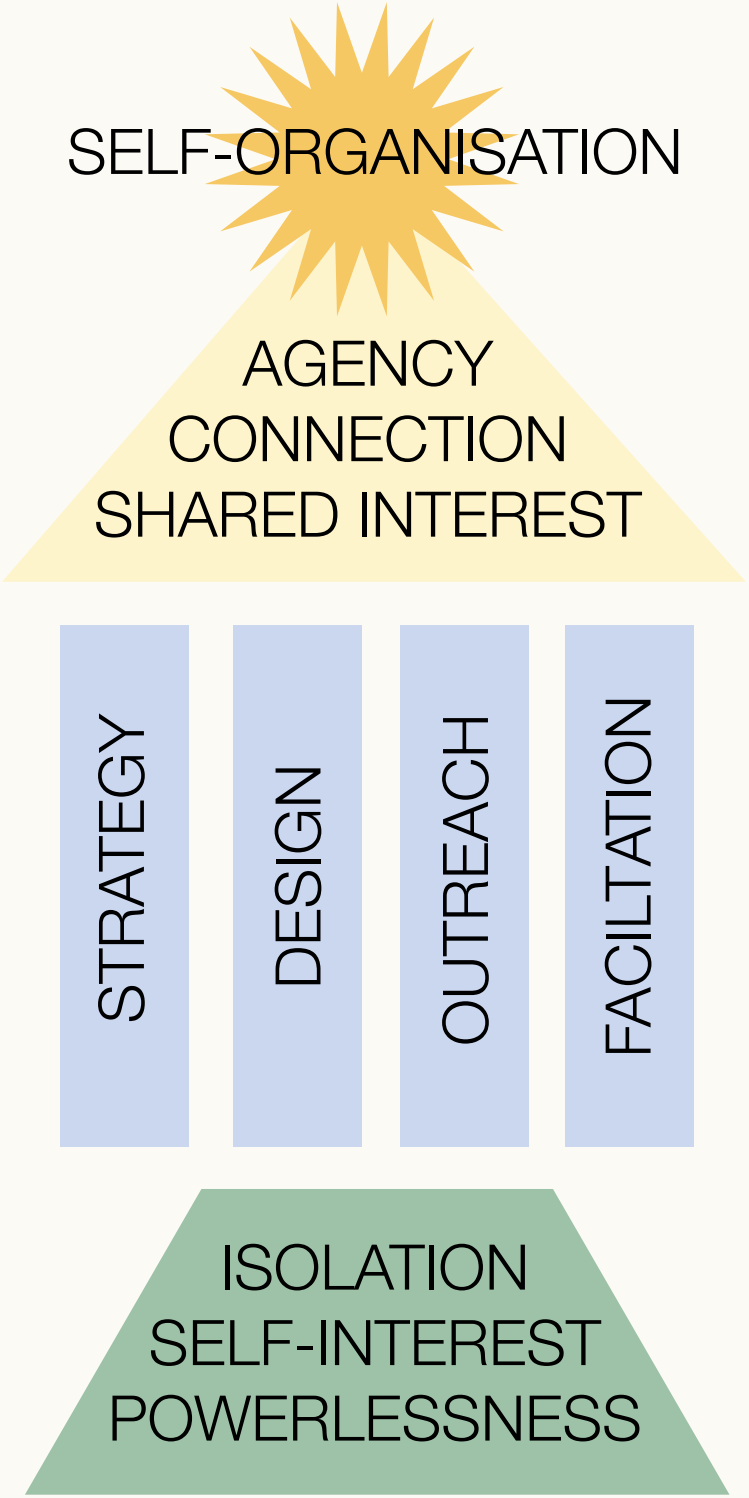
Firstly, popular assemblies work with whoever turns up, whereas citizens assemblies bring together a sample of the population using a process called 'sortition' to randomly select a representative group.

Secondly, popular assemblies tend to be political spaces that the community has created or 'claimed' in which they can define their own terms of engagement. On the other hand, citizens assemblies tend to be mostly organised by governments (they're the only bodies with enough money and interest to commission the very expensive process). Citizens are then invited into the space to contribute within terms set by government (Mellier & Wilson, 2023). So, purely by their existence, popular assemblies challenge traditional political culture where citizens tend to be locked out of decision-making or just invited on specific terms and condtiions.

Deliberation is a key part of popular (and citizens) assemblies. It is an approach to coming to decisions through considered collective dialogue. Deliberation enables everyone at an assembly to 'discuss the issues and options and to develop their thinking together before coming to a view on the question or issue, taking into account the values that inform other participants' opinions' (Involve, 2025).

Crucially, popular assemblies are **structured** to produce a specific outcome (that could be a decision, action, set of demands, etc.). And while the design varies widely they tend to follow a basic structure:

But assemblies are much more than a way of making decisions. The sections below will try to show how assemblies can be a space to recreate a new kind of political culture in society by supporting people involved to build **agency, connection, and shared interests**. This is a direct challenge to the way that the politics of division makes each of us feel **powerless, isolated and self-interested**. Crucially, the development of these capacities sets up the community to begin to **self-organise** to make material changes to their lives.



However, to get these benefits, organisers of popular assemblies must pay careful attention to a few things: **strategy, outreach, design, and facilitation**. These will each be explored in much more detail now.

"Love without power is sentimental and anaemic."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr

4 Strategy

Popular assemblies are both a means to an end – and an end in themselves. They are a tool we can use to support people to win material change in their own lives. For this to happen, assemblies must be linked to strategy - clear plans that connect deliberation to action.

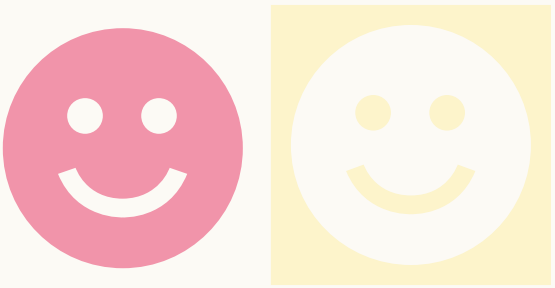
The strategy process all starts with developing a shared analysis of where power currently sits within your community. Based on this, a strategy can be created to shift that power towards ordinary people.

This strategy process takes place at two points in the organising process: Before any assemblies happen, organisers should develop a strategy. After each event, assembly participants should (with the support of organisers) develop a strategy to achieve the outcomes they decided on through the deliberation.

4.1 Power Analysis

"I propose that there is another kind of power based not on resources, things, or attributes, but rooted in the social and cooperative relations in which people are enmeshed by virtue of group life."

- Frances Fox Piven



A power analysis is a tool that helps us understand who holds power in our community and how that power can be shifted. It's about mapping out the people, organisations, and institutions that make decisions, as well as working out who is on our side, who is against us, and who is undecided.

Doing this analysis also shows us our own strengths and weaknesses — how much power we have, how ready we are to act, and where we need to grow. On a practical level, it's also just useful to know who the influential people are before you bump into them at meetings or in the local community (Community Organisers, 2022).

A simple power analysis might look like this:

Identify your community.

List the people and organisations with power.

Sort them into categories (allies, opponents, etc).

Research key individuals and groups.

Work out where your base of support lies.

Update your analysis as you learn more.

But developing a power analysis isn't just about collecting information. It's about building the confidence and skills of ordinary people. If participants are actively involved in the process, they feel ownership and often bring knowledge that no outside expert could provide. As Jane McAlevey (2016) says: "The chief way to help ordinary people to go from object to subject is to involve them as central actors in the process of developing the power-structure analysis in their own campaigns." In other words, people learn best when they take part directly - and when they do, they become more powerful together.

4.2 Campaign Planning

“Strategy is turning the resources you have into the power you need, to win the change you want.”

– Marshal Ganz

Once you understand where power lies, the next step is planning how to shift it. A campaign plan is like a roadmap: it shows us where we want to go, where we are now, and the steps we need to take in between.

A good campaign plan isn’t complicated - it can be done with a big sheet of paper and a group of people willing to think and act together. A campaign plan can be created together in a few stages:

1. Set your vision – Write down where you want to get to (e.g. “every young person in our town can access free, high-quality education”).

2. Mark where you are now – Put an X for today’s reality.

3. Work backwards – Map the milestones you need to hit to reach the vision (e.g. get enough petition signatures, win council support, secure media coverage).

4. Break down the first milestone – Set clear objectives that are specific, measurable, ambitious, realistic, and time-bound.

5. List the tasks – What exactly needs to be done to reach that first milestone? Who will do it? When will it be done?

6. Share the work – Divide tasks fairly across the group and support each other. No one should be left isolated or overburdened.

7. Review and adapt – Regularly check what’s working, what isn’t, and update the plan as you learn more.

Like the power analysis, the plan should be made with as many people who are affected as possible. This way, people feel real ownership and their engagement in the project will be sustained. As such, they don't just follow instructions, they become leaders in their own right. This is how assemblies can turn discussion into real action and build collective power.

Overall, assembly organisers everywhere have not given strategy enough attention, resulting in processes that do not meaningfully advance the interests of participants or the people they represent (branded as 'talking shops'). This lack of action is dangerous as it can result in participants feeling alienated and hopeless. It is the responsibility of everyone who is involved in organising an assembly to make sure that how we connect deliberation to action is thought about first.

"The future of every community lies in capturing the passion, imagination, and resources of its people"

Ernesto Sirolli

5 Outreach

To put it simply, the quality of the outreach for the popular assembly event will determine who turns up. Poor organisation will mean that it's mostly the 'usual suspects' that turn up (who tend to be more privileged).

In every case, organisers should be roughly aiming for an accurate spread of people in the chosen area but with an overrepresentation of individuals from traditionally marginalised people (e.g. BME, LGBTQ+, differently abled, homeless, under 18s, those with fewer educational opportunities). Extra care should be taken to build relationships with these people since structural inequalities (basically, the way the systems of power give some people lots more opportunities than others) tend to prevent their full participation in normal politics and community events more generally (skewing the process towards people with more privileges). This approach requires a sensitivity to the make-up of people in an area.

At the same time, to be broadly considered as valid, an assembly has to bring together enough of the population, and that number needs to be big enough for it to practically have power (some organisers suggest 1/5 of the population of an area) (PDR, 2024).

Moreover, the quality of the outreach will determine how people participate. That's why an additional part of outreach should be to create a sense of ownership over the assembly. Any notion of ownership over the process will make everyone taking part feel more powerful together (more detail below).

There are many ways to do outreach for a popular assembly. This document does not have time to explore the extremely varied and complex skills of organising your community. However, here is a tried and tested framework to get you started (Community Organisers, 2025):

☺ Reach – We start with those we know—friends, family, neighbours, colleagues—but must go further. We reach people by going where they are: knocking on doors, visiting schools, community centres, mosques, churches, and clubs. No one is "hard to reach" if we make the effort.

☺ Listening – We listen for three things: What do people care about? What do they want to do? Who is ready to lead? Listening builds trust and community, helping us find connectors who open doors.

☺ Connect – We bring people together to share stories and ideas. Small groups spark change and linking them strengthens our movement. Connections break barriers and build bridges.

☺ Organise – Change requires persistence and collective power. We may lack money or influence, but together, we can achieve lots. Through democratic, cooperative work, we keep growing until we have the power to act.

☺ Leadership – Power is shared, not concentrated. We train and support community leaders, ensuring leadership is democratic, sustainable, and rooted in action.

6 Design

"The art of gathering begins with purpose: When should we gather? And why?"

– Priya Parker

The answer to this question will differ with every local assembly. In any case, organisers of each assembly event should be absolutely clear on what it is focused on accomplishing. For example, is it trying to inform, investigate or actually solve an issue?

As the old saying goes, 'form follows function'. In other words, the format of the event should reflect its desired aims and objectives. Format can be divided into micro, mid and macro design. Below are some examples to suggest what the terms mean. (You will notice that these are not neat categories – the point is to have mindset of a designer thinking on all these levels).

- **Macro-design** e.g. Choice of venue, main question, order of sections, timings, rules.*

- **Mid-design** e.g. Choice of room layout, sub-questions, content, flow and timings within each section.

- **Micro-design** e.g. Words we choose, physical cues we give to others, small details concerning layout of the space.

Why do we pay attention to how we design the space, including the smallest details? It is a common mistake to think that the way people behave in the space is only based on their individual personalities. In fact, it is the norms and rules of the space that we design (or perhaps fail to design) that have the largest effect on individual and overall group behaviour. Studies show that how we feel and behave in a space can be determined by even the smallest details, even if we aren't aware of them, like where the biscuits are on the table (e.g. Pentland, 2008). So, effectively designing the 'vibe' of the room can make people feel more relaxed, engaged, connected, and empowered. Here's a few tips for highly effective design:

a. Macro design

- Choose a venue to fit the purpose of the event and number of participants (too roomy = dead atmosphere / too tight = noisy) (see Kjær Vad Nielsen & MacDonald-Nelson, 2025).
- Create clear rules for the space (e.g. “all people are welcome but not all behaviours”). Rules can create an imaginary, transient world that is actually more playful than an everyday gathering.
- Create as many opportunities for quality human connection as possible (e.g. icebreakers).
- Include lots of breaks (note: more time for human connection and unstructured deliberation).
- Include opportunities for people to share their life stories (note: a story is about a decision that you made. It’s not about what happens to you) (explain that people can share as much or little as they want).
- Include a variation of activities (e.g. mix in sitting with standing and movement).
- Take participants on a journey, evoking a range of emotions (e.g. through singing, story-telling, art, etc.).
- Serve food – ideally home-cooked, hot food (people are always very grateful).
- Set up a creche area (including e.g. soft toys and pens) with a child minder.
- Give participants enough time to discuss issues with as many of their fellow participants as possible.
- Allow enough time for participants to hear views from across the assembly.
- Carefully choose the mechanism for making decisions (e.g. by consensus or voting, or by a combination of the two, or another way) and its implications.
- Allow at least 30 minutes at the end for people to self-organise to start to taking action on their decisions (explanation: important to do so within immediate time and physical space).

b. Midi-design

- Start by situating the assembly in a broader framing to give it meaning (i.e. what are we all doing here and why does it matter). Try to avoid starting with logistics (for instance, where the fire exits are located).
- State the purpose of the assembly clearly. Then repeat it again.
- Use circular tables with just enough room for eight chairs to fit around (to maximise eye contact).
- Accommodate for individuals with varying experiences, perspectives and abilities (e.g. hearing loops for deafness).
- Clearly state process and timings (contributes to a sense of psychological safety). Then, stick to them.
- End well, co-creating meaning out of what happened. Ask guests to look inwards (about taking a moment to understand, remember, acknowledge, and reflect on what just happened) and outwards (about preparing to part from one another and considering what to take back into the 'real world').

c. Micro-design

- Welcome people with a warm smile and eye contact at the door as soon as they enter**.
- Introduce people to one another to get them chatting ("Megan do you know Rick? You both live in… right?")
- Hosts should model the desired culture of the space (e.g. active listening).
- Try to avoid ending with literal thank you's - try honouring instead. Try honouring what was least rather than most obvious ("I want to honour the work of the cleaners who prepared the room").

**Fortunately, there are many different generalised macro-designs to choose from that can support organisers (e.g. Open Space, World Café, etc.). In every case, designers should consider whether it supports the desired outcomes of the assembly.*

***Studies show that audiences disproportionately remember the first 5%, the last 5%, and a climactic moment of the event (Hartmann, 2013).*

****The opening sends clear signals to guests about what to expect from the experience. "Guests will immediately be reading cues and asking themselves: What do I think of this gathering? Am I in good hands? Is the host nervous? Should I be? What's going to happen here? Is this worth my time? Do I belong? Do I want to belong?" (Parker, 2022)*

***** "What really has agency in a space isn't the people themselves, but the structure of the space. The culture of communication. The unspoken expectations of how we treat each other. Change that, and you change the group. Change the group, and you change society." (Hallam, 2025).*

7 Facilitation

"Facilitators must continuously stay sensitive to power relations and their different manifestations and try to change those and make them as temporary as possible"

– Mare Atlantica

Facilitation is about helping groups work well together, making sure everyone gets a chance to be involved in a meaningful way.

A **facilitator** is someone who helps meetings and group discussions run smoothly. Instead of telling people what to think or do, they help the group use their own knowledge and ideas to make better decisions and work together more effectively (Involve, 2025).

Here's a few tips for highly effective facilitation:

- ♥ See participants as experts.
- ♥ Use inclusive language, avoiding stereotypes.
- ♥ Ensure that all participants understand the information being presented.
- ♥ Model the behaviour you want to see (e.g. active listening).
- ♥ Support participants to find agreement and solutions that work for the most people.
- ♥ Stay neutral in attitude towards the content of the discussion (i.e. don't input views).

- Be aware of power differences and seek to remedy them (e.g. generally men are more outspoken than women – seeking input from women and keeping an eye on the length of men's contributions can remedy this easily).

- Ask people to speak from their concrete experiences rather than their abstract ideas

- Encourage people to share words and thoughts that are still forming rather than preplanned speeches.

- Use open ended questions to probe issues.
- Keep the deliberation focused on the question under exploration.

- Ensure the process keeps to time (important!).

- Ask for contributions from those yet to speak.

- Alternate speakers of different genders.

- Promote not knowing as just as productive as knowing.

Facilitation always involves some level of power. A good facilitator uses that power to 'protect, equalise and connect' participants (Parker, 2022). If a facilitator avoids taking responsibility, they don't actually make the space fairer – they just leave a gap for others (usually those with the most social power) to take control, which can make things worse.

Provided that the outreach, design, facilitation and strategy are done effectively, participants will develop agency, connection and shared interest.

"To alienate human beings from their own decision-making is to change them into objects."

Paulo Freire

8 Agency

The politics of division has left us powerless, making us believe we must wait for others to lead or solve our problems. But when we recognise that change is our collective responsibility, progress can happen quickly.

In a popular assembly, people are led through a process of **dialogue**, **reflection**, and **action** that helps them recognise their agency. Through the act of speech, participants get to take part in the co-creation of knowledge (rather than having it given to them, as is usually the case). In reflection, they begin to form a mental picture of the structures of division that shape our lives and understand how to challenge them. In organising action with fellow members, participants begin to see

DIALOGUE ➤ REFLECTION ➤ ORGANISATION ➤ ACTION

themselves as agents that have the capacity to reshape the world.
The action element is crucial and has rarely been fully realised. After the deliberation, it is essential that participants have time to self-organise and start to plan next steps in the room. The point is that participants actually get to fully and immediately use their new agency through planning action with others.

Popular assemblies have been shown to build capacities of even the most excluded groups. As an example, in South Indian village meetings (called gram sabhas), poor villagers have the legal right to decide how money is spent on local development and who should receive support from anti-poverty programs. These meetings help people build confidence in speaking up and working together, skills they then use to navigate a society where resources are limited, and inequality is common (Rao & Sanyal, 2010). In this sense, popular assemblies are both democratic institutions and radical educational spaces.

“Sawubona“ (I see you)

“Ngikhona“ (I am here)

Zulu Greeting & Response

9 Connection

Humans evolved to live in close connection with each other. We get huge satisfaction from the different ways we can relate to each other, caring and being cared about. This is our deep nature, but it's not necessarily what we see (or notice) or hear most about.

Connection is so fundamental to what it is to be human that if something messes with it then everything gets messed up. We become destructive of ourselves and of others.

Children growing up amongst disconnected adults, not getting the connection they need, become the next generation of insecure and disconnected adults. At some point the level of disconnection started to grow out of control, and it reached the point where people started to believe this destructive behaviour was the true nature of humans, rather than the nature of disconnected humans.

From inside the disconnection, it looks like we're alone and that few others can be trusted, and so it seems to make sense to act in our own narrow self-interest, and in doing that we all become somewhat untrustworthy, which then feeds the mistrust.

When people are connected and trust each other, security is deep and wide: it's the security of cooperation and mutual care, the security of everyone having each other's back. But when people don't (or can't) trust each other, then security becomes a narrow, shallow, individual thing – it's about grabbing as much as you can for yourself or your group, against all others. In this struggle some inevitably end up with more wealth and control than others, and so hierarchies form spontaneously.*

But gaining advantage over others never actually gives us real security – it only gives a temporary, fragile illusion of security, and only for a small number of people. Real and lasting security can only be achieved by rebuilding connection and trust.

Popular assemblies are about releasing the potential for connection inherent in human nature. Connection builds trust, and that leads to cooperation, the power to make good things happen at scale, and true security.

People may come to an assembly holding very different positions or opinions. Many of us hold onto our positions and opinions very tightly, as part of our identity – which means we all think we're right. Even simply hearing someone express a different opinion can feel threatening. We may assume that we can use facts or logic to force someone to change their mind, but it doesn't work like that. Before people can

consider new ways of thinking about something we have to care about who they are. We have to build a relationship, a human connection. We have to hear their story and tell them ours.

So how do connections actually happen? Studies show that people form close bonds through displays of vulnerability and by really giving attention to others. Sharing vulnerability can be hard. But studies show that showing vulnerability is an essential part of building trust. When we tell our story we signal several things to the group: humility ("I don't think I'm better than you / I don't know all the answers."), mutual dependence ("I need you"), openness ("I have nothing to hide from you"), and safety ("It's safe to be vulnerable here"). When a signal of weakness is reciprocated, a 'vulnerability loop' is established. Social scientists say that vulnerability loops are the most basic building block of trust and cooperation (see Jeff Polzer). Studies show that the trust built through vulnerability is then extended to others. In other words, that trust becomes contagious! And so, habits of mutual risk can create a highly connected society.

Giving our undivided attention can also be hard. Yet empirical studies also demonstrate that our precious attention is also a precursor for trust building. When we give others our attention, we listen. Crucially, truly transformative listening means not just paying attention to the facts or part we agree with but being an open space for the other person. And so, both being vulnerable and giving our attention to others has extraordinary potential for healing – not just the individual, but society as a whole.

**The simple feedback mechanism here ensures some small group of people always ends up at the top. It's not important who they are – if it weren't them, it would be someone else. Far more important to address is the disconnection that leads to hierarchies forming in the first place.*

“Assemblies turn the ‘I‘ into a ‘We‘“

Claudia Chwalisz

10 Shared interest

In a popular assembly, we deliberate together. Deliberation is fundamentally different from debate: debate is a competition, deliberation has no winners or losers. Instead, people relate to others as equals with the aim of reaching a shared decision together. As we have looked at, a fair and equal deliberation is created purposively through good design and facilitation. This approach to politics has been shown to make us think about others more. For example… (Fishkin & Luskin, 2012)

♥ In Texas, the percentage of participants willing to pay extra on their electricity bills to support wind power for the community increased by approximately 30%.

♥ In New Haven, support for revenue sharing between towns to support developments that benefited the region increased significantly.

♥ In China, participants chose infrastructure projects that would help the broader community.

♥ In the UK, for example, agreement with the statement "when voting, people should always put the interests of the public as a whole before those of themselves and their family" was found to increase significantly as a result of deliberation.

Now imagine, deliberation is done not only among neighbours or people in the same city or country, but across countries or regions…. During the world's first Global Assembly (2021), randomly selected citizens from around the world deliberated together, producing results that showed a level of collective interest beyond anything produced during international conferences (e.g. that responsibilty for stopping climate change should be spread 'according to the capabilities and historical contributions of countries and corporations') (Global Assembly, 2021). As one assembly member remarked:

"Sharing our opinions and ideas, we were like one family"

– Mohamed Salem, Assembly Member, Yemen

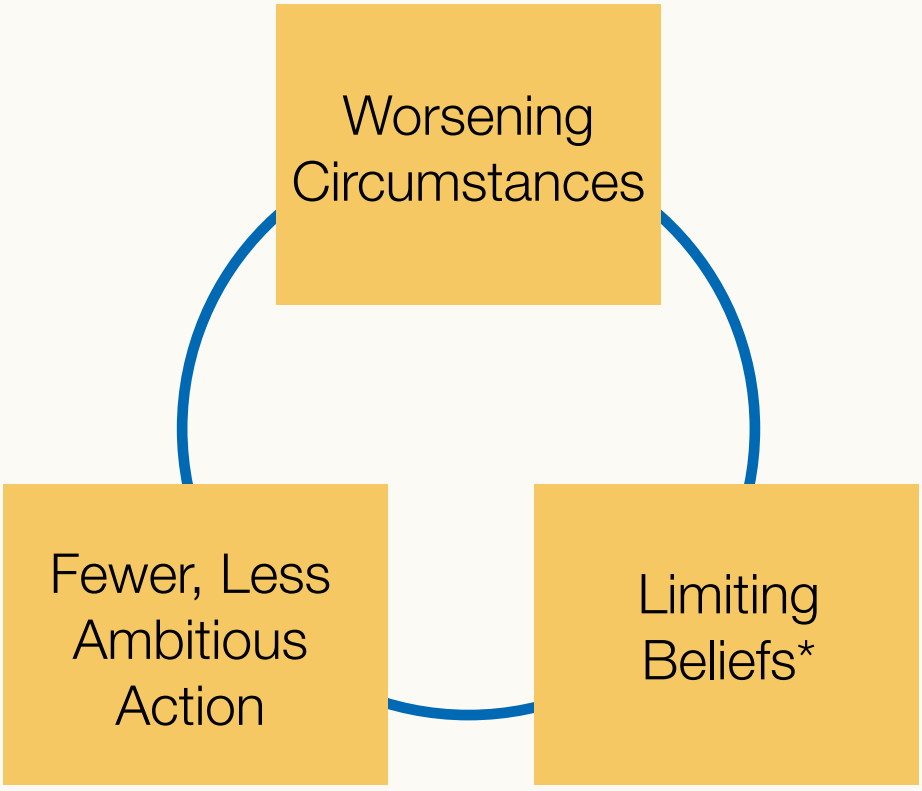
When the world is on the brink of ruin due to multiple 'collective-action problems' (e.g. conflict, ecological breakdown, runaway Artificial Intelligence) could a renewed sense of our shared humanity be such a bad thing…?

11 Self-Organisation

Assemblies are most powerful when they move beyond discussion and help communities self-organise. To get there, people need some basic foundations: a belief that they can act (agency), trusted relationships that hold them together (connection), and a sense of common purpose (shared interest). These capacities make collective action possible - without these, attempts at collective action quickly fall apart.

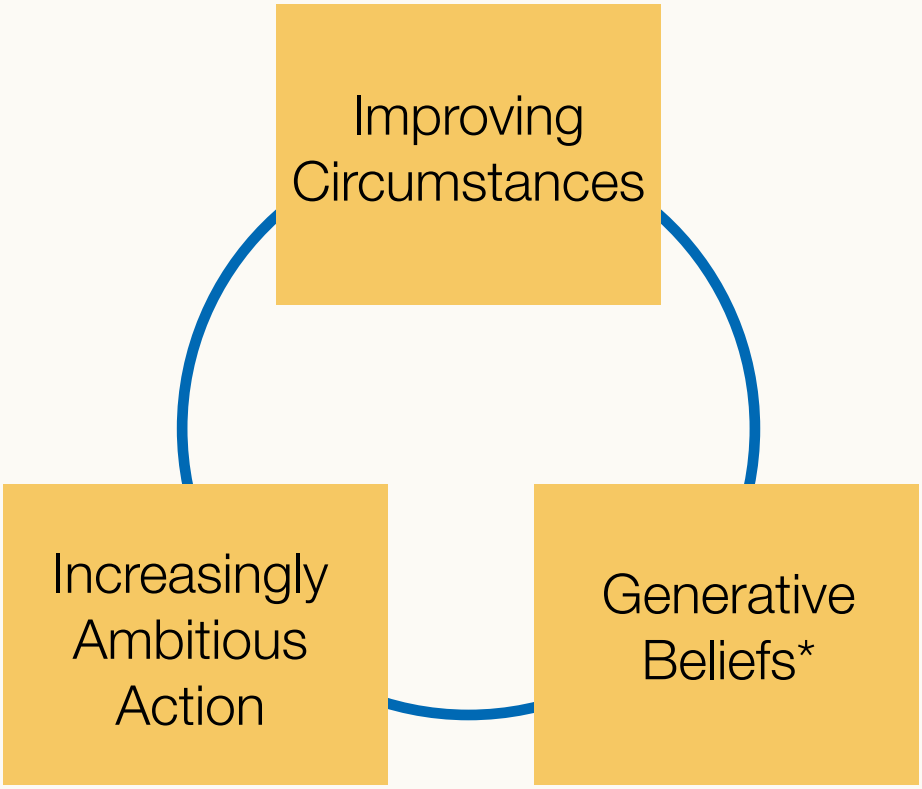
But these foundations are just the starting point. Real learning and growth happen through action itself. Each step matters: small wins build confidence, defeats teach lessons, and each round of struggle deepens collective understanding.

If people face constant setbacks — cuts to services, worsening inequality, or repeated losses — they can fall into a negative loop. They start to believe that "nothing will ever change" or that "people like us can't win." These limiting beliefs weaken confidence and lead to fewer, smaller actions, which only make things worse. This is how disempowerment feeds on itself.



(Iswe, 2024)

But the cycle can also spin in the other direction. When people take action and win something — even a small step forward — they begin to believe "we can change things together." These generative beliefs push them to try bigger, bolder actions. Each success, whether it's defending a service, forcing a council decision, or building a new community project, strengthens people's willingness to act again. This is how empowerment grows — through a positive feedback loop where action builds belief and belief fuels further action.



(Ibid., 2024)

Crucially, when people act as subjects — shaping decisions, building campaigns, and creating alternatives — they are transformed. They stop seeing themselves as passive recipients of decisions made elsewhere and start to understand themselves as political actors in their own right. This change in the way they see the world is as important as any single campaign outcome, because it builds the long-term capacity for communities to organise and govern themselves.

In this sense, self-organisation is not a final goal but an ongoing practice: the continual process through which people, acting together, create power, transform themselves, and open space for new forms of social life.

“Freedom Is an Endless Meeting“

Francesca Polletta

Conclusion

Popular assemblies should be seen as part of the long struggle for political inclusion. Just as past generations fought for the right of working-class men and then women to vote, today the challenge is to extend democracy further: the right of ordinary people to directly participate in the decisions that shape their lives. Assemblies are the next step in the historical trajectory of deeper democracy.

Yet assemblies cannot remain isolated experiments. To have lasting impact, they must be institutionalised — connected into wider systems so that decisions made in neighbourhoods, workplaces, and schools carry real weight. To understand how we must first understand the limits of direct democracy.

Direct democracy is no doubt the richest and deepest form of participation. But it is also not practical (or desirable) to run society where everyone participates in every decision taking place at local, city, regional, national and international scales. If democracy is to extend beyond the local, then assemblies must be linked into wider systems.

This is where delegation becomes necessary. But delegation cannot simply copy the old model of distant representatives who act without accountability. Instead, communities can choose spokespeople who remain answerable to those they represent, can be recalled if they lose trust, and rotate regularly to prevent power from concentrating in a few hands. In this way, assemblies can combine the richness of direct participation with the practical need for coordination at scale.

Venezuela's communal councils are one example of this model, where assemblies elect recallable spokespeople (voceros) who link local decisions to higher levels (Harnecker, 2015; Lerner, 2006). But Venezuela is not alone. Versions of this "direct plus delegated" democracy can also be seen in experiments from Barcelona to Rojava to Mississippi, showing that assemblies can be scaled in many contexts (see TNI, 2021; Zechner, M., 2015; Dirik, 2022; Akuno & Nangwaya, 2017).

The lesson is clear: assemblies on their own cannot solve everything, but woven into wider democratic systems, they can give communities real power to govern themselves. The fight for assemblies is not only about today's struggles but about completing democracy's unfinished journey — ensuring that people, not elites, make the decisions that shape their lives. Assemblies are not the final form of democracy, but they are a vital step forward: schools of freedom and engines of self-organisation for the world to come.

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