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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Assemblies Across Borders: The Democratic Transposition of Citizens' Assemblies in Latin America

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We propose the concept of democratic transposition to describe how democratic innovations travel and take root in regions, countries, and contexts different from those in which they originated. In such processes, policymakers and practitioners should avoid democratic colonization—the uncritical transfer of models shaped by coercion or epistemic dominance. As an alternative, we advance the notion of deliberative innovation: the idea that innovation should itself emerge from a dialogical process among policymakers, local communities, and international peers. We argue that transposition is deliberative when actors display receptiveness (openness to feedback from both international peers and local communities), sensitivity (attentiveness to local contexts rather than reliance on one-size-fits-all approaches), and generativity (producing outcomes that are not only new but also valuable both locally and beyond). Drawing on four examples—Colombia, Brazil, Mexico, and Chile—we illustrate how these experiences demonstrate the potential of deliberative innovation.

Keywords: citizens' assemblies; democratic diffusion; democratic colonization; democratic innovation; citizen participation; Global South; Latin America

Introduction

In this article, we explore what we call 'democratic transposition,' borrowing the term from music theory, where transposition involves changing the pitches of a musical work without altering their relationships (Music Copyright Infringement Resource 2024). Similarly, in democratic theory, transposition refers to the relocation of democratic innovations or their normative frameworks from one geographical context to another, preserving their broad institutional structure while adapting to distinct social, cultural, or legal environments. This process can result in democratic innovations that, while structurally similar, may exhibit significant variations in practice. While extensive work exists on the diffusion of ideas and practices in various fields of democratic studies (Huntington 1993; O'Loughlin et al. 1998), the field of deliberative democracy remains relatively unexplored in this regard.

To develop, substantiate, and explore the concept of democratic transposition, we focus on citizens' assemblies—an innovation that originated in the Global North and has been replicated in the Global South only in the past 6 years. These assemblies first emerged in Canada (2004–2006) with the British Columbia and Ontario Citizens' Assemblies, then spread across the Global North, reaching countries such as Australia, Ireland, and later others in Europe. Over the past 5 years, they have expanded into the Global South, with cases now documented in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Cervellini et al. 2024; Curato et al. 2024; Dean et al. 2024). In its 2020 study of over 400 representative deliberative processes conducted in the Global North, the OECD (2020) described this trend as the 'deliberative wave.' By 2024, the database had grown to include more than 700 cases, encompassing processes in 17 Global South countries. This ongoing expansion—unfolding in real time—raises important questions about how these democratic innovations are adapting to contexts that differ significantly from those in which they first emerged. At a normative level, the central issue is not only whether these assemblies should take root in new settings, but how they should be introduced. This article engages with some of these questions.

We argue that for the 'deliberative wave' to reach Latin America in a constructive and stable way—one that can secure the benefits inherent to democratic innovation, such as public creativity, collective intelligence, and civic betterment—it must avoid replicating the dynamics often described as 'democratic colonization' (Mendonça & Asenbaum 2025). We argue that policymakers and practitioners seeking to implement deliberative democracy in Latin America should instead promote a distinct normative framework, which we call *deliberative innovation*. By this, we do not mean introducing a new

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practice that happens to be labeled deliberative. Rather, deliberative innovation refers to a way of innovating democracies themselves: it is the practice of designing and adapting democratic institutions *through a deliberative or dialogical process*. Democratic innovations should be deliberative not only in their internal design, but also in the very process by which they are conceived and introduced. While the former dimension has received substantial attention in the literature, the latter has been less explored. It is one thing to transpose a democratic innovation into a new context uncritically; it is quite another to adapt it deliberatively. From the normative perspective we suggest, this requires showing *receptiveness*, *sensitivity*, and *generativity* in the process of transposition. Policymakers and organizers should remain open, listen to criticism, and adapt along the way (receptiveness). They should show a willingness to incorporate local contexts rather than attempting to export or import one-size-fits-all models (sensitivity). By doing so, the process of innovation itself becomes generative—sparks incrementally new ideas, practices, and models through the process of deliberating with others engaged in promoting democracy. To illustrate these three attributes, we examine four examples from Latin America: the Itinerant Citizens' Assembly of Bogotá, Colombia; the Citizens' Jury on Anticorruption Policy in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico; the Decidadania mini-publics in Brazil; and the Lxs 400 deliberative poll in Chile.

By 'deliberative wave,' we do not mean that deliberation or democratic innovation only recently began in Latin America (Pogrebinschi & Ross 2019). We use the term 'deliberative wave' more modestly: to capture the fact that a practice widely recognized as characteristic of the global deliberative wave (OECD 2020)—namely, the citizens' assembly—has now reached Latin America. The most comprehensive comparative empirical study to date in the region, covering 30 years from 1990 to 2020, documents 3744 democratic innovations (Pogrebinschi 2023). As Pogrebinschi shows, these range across a wide array of models and instances: some oriented toward citizen representation, others toward deliberation, direct voting, or digital engagement. Examples of this public infrastructure, which she highlights as sometimes dependent on the state and at other times on non-state actors, include housing and water management councils, public policy conferences, prior consultations, planning councils, and participatory budgeting. Within this landscape, 1602 innovations can be considered deliberative. We focus on randomly selected citizens' assemblies, which, as Pogrebinschi notes, remain marginal compared to the broader set of democratic innovations identified in her study.

This article contributes to the growing multilingual literature on the development of citizens' assemblies in the region (Castillo et al. 2024; Cervellini et al. 2024; Česnulaitytė, Rey & Niño-Aguilar, 2025; Curato et al. 2024; Dean et al. 2024; Felipe Vera et al. 2021; Romão Netto & Cervellini 2021; Sampaio 2023). It also aims to contribute to the ongoing dialog on how to decolonize deliberative democracy by reflecting on practices and global interactions. While some scholars have focused their work on the decolonization of deliberative *theory* (Banerjee 2022), our approach emphasizes *practice*—both critically and constructively—following the path of recent contributions in the field (Mendonça & Asenbaum 2025).

Democratic Transpositions in the Broader Landscape of Democratic Diffusion

The global diffusion of both ideas and practices has received scholarly attention across multiple disciplines. In legal theory, researchers have examined the dissemination of legal institutions—such as systems of judicial review—as well as legal theories and interpretations (López 2004). In other fields such as public administration and international relations (Jordana & Levi-Faur 2005; Shipan & Volden 2012), scholars of policy transfer have analyzed how policies in areas such as public health, tobacco control, and counterterrorism travel across borders, both within national systems (e.g., from state to state in federal contexts) and across regions or the globe (Simmons & Elkins 2004). While foundational studies in this field focused on policy innovation among US states—particularly in budgetary reforms (Walker 1969)—today, research on policy diffusion spans nearly every domain, from local to global levels.

While policy diffusion is typically defined as the process by which policies of some governments influence the policies of other governments (Gilardi & Wasserfallen 2019), this framework is ill-suited for analyzing the spread of democratic innovations, particularly citizens' assemblies. In this case, what travels is not a formal policy, let alone a legal institution or governmental arrangement. At their current stage of development—both in Latin America and, arguably, in many European contexts—citizens' assemblies do not yet constitute official government policy. Rather, they represent a broad category of democratic mechanisms that, while often aspiring to become institutionalized and legally embedded, are still predominantly used on an ad hoc basis (OECD 2020; OECD 2021). The range of conveners varies widely—from executive and legislative bodies in their more formal iterations to civic associations in more informal settings.

In democratic theory, a parallel body of research has emerged to examine the diffusion of democratic institutions. Foundational contributions by scholars like Huntington (1993) and Starr (1991) in the early 1990s explored how democratic regimes spread, proposing frameworks such as 'third wave' democratization or 'domino effects' to explain these dynamics. Much of the literature has centered on democratization, particularly how authoritarian regimes transition to democratic rule. Scholars have proposed a variety of explanatory models for these transitions, emphasizing the role of geographic proximity, regional networks, and international clusters (Gleditsch & Ward 2006; O'Loughlin et al. 1998). Meanwhile, other scholars have challenged the role of democratic diffusion, proposing alternative theories to explain democratic adaptation (Houle, Kayser & Xiang 2016).

However, the diffusion of democratic innovations (Elstub & Escobar 2019; Smith 2009)—distinct from regime change—has received comparatively less attention. Notable exceptions include the work of Sintomer, Cabannes and colleagues on the spread of participatory budgeting, as published in this very journal a decade ago (Cabannes & Lipietz 2017; Sintomer et al. 2012). To capture this particular form of diffusion, we introduce the concept of *democratic transposition*. Democratic transposition refers to the relocation of democratic innovations or their normative frameworks from one geographical context to another, preserving their broad institutional structure while adapting to distinct social, cultural, or legal environments. In a democratic transposition, while the core institution remains largely unchanged, its implementation in a different context may lead to variations. Contemporary examples of democratic transpositions include the global spread of participatory budgeting in the 1990s (Ganuza & Baiocchi 2012; Sintomer et al. 2012), the 'deliberative turn' in democratic theory and practice (Goodin 2012), the emergence of institutions designed to represent future generations and the accompanying normative shift toward representative claims on behalf of the unborn (González-Ricoy & Rey 2019), and the recent proliferation of citizens' assemblies. What travels in this process is not democracy in general, nor a broad policy area such as health or education, but a specific institutional design—or essential components of it—that originated elsewhere and is imbued with claims of innovation or normativity in its place of origin. These may also include internationally developed standards and norms around democratic integrity. This process can be likened to a musical composition undergoing transposition, in which altering the pitches of the music without changing the underlying relationships between the notes can result in a different sound while still preserving the essence of the original melody.

We are not the first to observe the emergence of what we call democratic transpositions, particularly in the field of deliberative democracy and, more specifically, in citizens' assemblies or mini-publics. Scholars from various disciplines have sought to conceptualize this phenomenon using different terminologies (Schritt & Voß 2023; Voß, Schritt & Sayman 2022). Some scholars have employed the terms 'transfer' and 'translation' to describe these flows (Amelung & Grabner 2017). For instance, Schritt and Voß (2023), in their sociological research on the dissemination of deliberative mini-publics, have utilized the concept of translation and identified three ways in which these practices can undergo such a transfer: *colonization, appropriation, and commensuration*.

We opt for the concept of transposition because it allows us to highlight both the continuities and transformations involved in the movement of democratic innovations. While notions like transfer and translation emphasize displacement, transposition better captures the change or modulation inherent in this process. Drawing on music theory, we use transposition to refer not just to the movement of a (democratic) composition from one key to another, but to the way this shift alters the 'sound.' It is this new sound—the altered form of a practice or norm in a new context—that we aim to both capture and understand. In particular, we are interested in discerning the new sound of democratic innovations in Latin America. Before us, others have also challenged simple diffusion models as insufficient to capture the transformations implied in the movement of democratic innovations. A decade ago, Ganuza and Baiocchi made this point in their study of the transposition of participatory budgeting—though in the opposite direction, from South to North, during the 1990s. They argued that 'the travel itself has made PB into an attractive and politically malleable device by reducing and simplifying it to a set of procedures for the democratization of demand-making' (Ganuza & Baiocchi 2012: 1). We also prefer a concept broad enough to encompass not only democratic practices themselves (such as citizens' assemblies) but also the normative frameworks applied to them—such as catalogs of good practice, international standards (OECD 2020; OECD 2021), or integrity requirements (Parry 2024). This breadth is particularly important when discussing democratic innovations, because what typically travels is not only the institutional form but also an implicit or explicit understanding of what constitutes a 'good' version of that practice. This dynamic was evident in the transposition of participatory budgeting from South to North at the end of the last century and the beginning of this one (Cabannes & Lipietz 2017; Ganuza & Baiocchi 2012; Sintomer et al. 2012), and it is equally visible today in the North-to-South transposition of citizens' assemblies.

We aim to offer a normative framework that can guide future assessments of such transpositions. In the next section, we discuss the concepts of democratic colonization and deliberative innovation for this purpose: to serve as analytical tools for evaluating how democratic practices travel, adapt, and take root in new settings. While democratic innovations can be spread through processes of democratic colonization, they can also be adapted deliberatively to new contexts.

Democratic Colonization and Deliberative Innovation in the Transposition of Citizens' Assemblies

Democratic colonization

The evolving research agenda of decolonizing deliberative democracy spans historical critiques of its Western roots (Banerjee 2022; Hammond 2019), challenges to the West's perceived monopoly on deliberative values such as consensus-seeking (Ani 2014), critical and constructive efforts to rethink deliberative theory (Beausoleil 2025; Mendonça & Asenbaum 2025), engagements with broader projects of decolonizing or de-parochializing political thought (Gagnon et al. 2021; Getachew & Mantena 2021), and critiques of extractivist uses of deliberative frameworks that overlook their colonial legacies (Banerjee 2022). Democratic colonization has been linked to 'West-centric paradigms and hegemonic pedagogical frameworks that lay claim to universality and immutability' (Ibhawoh 2024). In her thought-provoking piece 'Must deliberative democracy's statutes fall?', Curato (2024)

challenges whether certain assumptions and institutions in the field should be revised to make way for others to emerge. The rational discourse rooted in the Frankfurt School, which forms the basis for deliberative democracy, tended to overlook issues of racism and colonialism, while simultaneously portraying the European-centric evolution of reason as the sole source of progress. The inclination to *export* democratic innovations from Europe to the rest of the world may stem from the preconceived notion that only Europe can offer a true evolution of democracy, while the rest of the world is considered primitive and in need of catching up.

On the practical side, others have scrutinized citizens' assemblies themselves on colonization grounds, contending that representative forums will inevitably replicate historical oppressions against indigenous communities. In these proportional forums, settler majorities may overwhelm indigenous voices, perpetuating explicit or tacit forms of racism that influence deliberation (Johnson 2024). Prior to implementing such innovations, a 'politics of reconciliation' with marginalized communities is deemed necessary (Bashir, cited by McCaul 2024). Many voices decry the monopolization of the field of deliberative democracy and democratic innovation by Western academia, lamenting the lack of dialog with indigenous academia and the failure to explore indigenous forms of political deliberation despite four decades of theoretical and practical development in the field (Asenbaum et al. 2024). Decolonization scholars further contend that the current field of democratic innovation, including the use of citizens' assemblies, lacks sufficient radicalism (Eseonu 2023). They argue that the agenda associated with these innovations only introduces cosmetic changes to Western liberal institutions, falling short of addressing the root issues or offering transformative solutions.

We contribute to this discourse by focusing on a particular mechanism: the role of democratic colonization in the transposition of democratic innovations. In this context, we define democratic colonization as the uncritical exportation or importation of democratic institutions, accompanied by forms of coercion, be they violent, economic, or epistemic. Democratic colonization involves three elements: exportation or importation, thoughtlessness, and force.

Exportation and importation describe one-directional transpositions of democratic institutions. In cases of exportation, actors from the country of origin actively promote or disseminate a democratic institution abroad. Importation, by contrast, is led by actors in the receiving country who adopt an external model. While both dynamics can occur independently, neither alone is sufficient to constitute democratic colonization. We must critique instances of democratic colonization but also avoid dismissing innovations simply because they originate elsewhere. What is problematic in democratic colonization is not merely foreignness, but rather the presence of coercion. Conversely, what is commendable about rejecting democratic colonization is not simply lauding local practices as inherently deliberative without careful normative scrutiny, but rather uncovering the forms of oppression and domination that can lurk behind both foreign and local practices.

What characterizes democratic colonization is not the cross-border movement of institutions, but the absence of dialogical adaptation to local contexts. Thoughtlessness refers to the uncritical application of institutional designs as standardized models, detached from the political, social, and cultural specificities of the receiving context. In this sense, the lack of dialog is not simply a matter of insensitivity—it amounts to the commodification of democratic innovation, treating it as a one-size-fits-all product (Mendonça & Asenbaum 2025).

Coercive mechanisms reinforce this dynamic, taking the form of violence, economic pressure, or cultural imposition. While the historical influence of military intervention and the conditional lending practices of multilateral institutions are well documented in Latin America (Stiglitz 2002), cultural forms of coercion tend to be more subtle. These often manifest as epistemic injustices and a pervasive sense of superiority. Such superiority may be expressed by exporters toward destination countries, but also emerges in local-local dynamics—when domestic actors importing deliberative practices position themselves as 'experts' on deliberative democracy, displaying little willingness to learn from the communities for whom the innovation is intended.

Deliberative innovation

While most studies on citizens' assemblies focus on how to make these forums deliberative, less attention has been paid to how deliberatively they come into being. This is where our normative proposal of deliberative innovation aims to contribute. To clarify our approach, we begin by distinguishing between two possible meanings of the term deliberative innovation. The first is *content-based*: an innovation is deliberative if it incorporates and promotes core deliberative principles—such as inclusiveness, reason-giving, and mutual respect (Bächtiger et al. 2018). In this sense, deliberativeness refers to the characteristics of the innovation itself. Under this definition, many would consider well-organized citizens' assemblies to be *deliberative* innovations (Landemore 2020). The second is *process-based*, which is the focus here: an innovation is deliberative if it emerges through dialogic exchange. Ideally, this includes meaningful dialogue with the intended beneficiaries of the innovation—such as the communities where it will be implemented—but also with the broader community of practice in deliberative democracy and democratic innovation, particularly across the Global South and Global North. In this sense, deliberativeness is not only a feature of the outcome but of the innovation process itself. Deliberative innovation, in this second sense, can be defined as the development or introduction of democratic practices and institutions that are new or untested in a given context and that arise through reciprocal dialog—both locally, with those affected, and globally, with peers in the field. The term *deliberative* signals a normative commitment: innovation should unfold in ways that reflect deliberative principles. To counter democratic colonization, policymakers and

practitioners from both the Global North and Global South must engage in reciprocal, deliberative exchanges. Innovation should not occur in isolation—neither from global deliberative experiences nor from the local social, cultural, and political contexts in which these practices take root. By focusing not only on what these democratic innovations *are*, but also on *how* they emerge and evolve, we hope to broaden the understanding of deliberative practice—making room for transposition, contextual adaptation, and the transformative potential of global-local dialogs. While our focus here is on citizens' assemblies, the concept applies to a wide range of democratic reforms.

As a normative framework for understanding how democratic innovations come into being, deliberative innovation is characterized by three key attributes: receptiveness, sensitivity, and generativity. We begin with *receptiveness*, which refers to the capacity to remain open, to listen to criticism, and to adapt in the process of innovation. As the transposition of citizens' assemblies unfolds worldwide in multiple directions, it is inevitable that challenges arise, new criticisms emerge, and innovative solutions are tested. Policymakers and practitioners should remain receptive to this ongoing evolution, incorporating relevant adjustments into their own designs. Innovators owe this receptiveness both to the broader community of global practitioners and, most importantly, to the local communities who are the intended beneficiaries of their innovations. Innovators in the Global North must avoid isolating themselves within preestablished circles; instead, they should make a conscious effort to engage with developments in the Global South and recognize how emerging practices there can contribute to their own learning (Tully 2020; Williams 2020). *Sensitivity* refers to a demonstrated willingness to adapt innovations to the specific contexts in which they are implemented. It involves resisting a superficial, one-size-fits-all approach that overlooks local realities, needs, and constraints. In other words, sensitivity is positioned against 'the commodification and de-contextualization of deliberative innovations' (Mendonça & Asenbaum 2024: 17). As democratic innovations spread, they need to be attuned to local contexts and made to prioritize the betterment of the most marginalized within those contexts. When transposing democratic institutions, the focus should be on emancipation—the idea that these institutions should improve the conditions of the most oppressed. Sensitivity applies not only to Southern countries but also to marginalized groups in Northern countries, including the poor, the disadvantaged, immigrants, and other vulnerable populations. *Generativity* refers to the ability to spark incrementally new ideas, practices, and models through the process of deliberating with others engaged in promoting democracy. Through deliberative innovation, practitioners and communities can generate novel solutions not only to challenges specific to the Global South but also to those recognized globally within the field. Both Northern and Southern innovators should remain open to embracing innovations that emerge organically during the process of transposing democratic practices, regardless of whether the transposition occurs from North to South or vice versa.

We do not view receptiveness, sensitivity, and generativity as isolated attributes. Rather, a single practice can embody all three dimensions simultaneously, as we will illustrate in our examples. For example, by responding to critiques within the field, practitioners can act generatively—developing innovations that are also sensitive to the local context. We fully acknowledge that realizing this ideal is difficult. Language barriers, structural inequalities, and political or legal constraints frequently stand in the way. But even when practice falls short, the ideal still matters. It serves as a regulative principle—offering direction, inspiring reflection, and anchoring democratic work in a commitment to dialog and mutual learning.

The Transposition of Citizens' Assemblies in Latin America

We defined transposition as the relocation of democratic innovations or their normative frameworks from one geographical context to another, preserving their broad institutional structure while adapting to distinct social, cultural, or legal environments. What is key to our understanding of how democratic innovations are relocated is the ambivalence between similarity and adaptation. As we will see, this dynamic is visible in the first Latin American cases. Similarities and differences coexist, and actors navigated the challenge of implementing something recognizable as aligned with international standards, while also ensuring it resonated with local realities. It is difficult to argue that the transposition of these initiatives was uncritical, un-dialogical, or coercive in the way our earlier concept of democratic colonization would imply. What is visible instead is at least a deliberate effort by organizers and conveners to transpose these mechanisms in ways compatible with what we have termed deliberative innovation. As we will argue, we found signals of receptiveness, sensitivity, and generativity in the four examples. Further research, however, could more deeply investigate the presence of these attributes—or, potentially, the presence of signals of democratic colonization.

Citizens' assemblies were transposed into Latin America beginning in 2019, roughly 15 years after their origin in British Columbia. Among the first cases in the region were 'Decididania: Climate on the Legislative Agenda' in Brazil, the Itinerant Citizens' Assembly in Bogotá, Colombia, the Civic Jury on Anticorruption Policy in Chihuahua, Mexico, and the Lxs 400 deliberative poll in Chile. Rather than developing these examples[1] empirically, our aim is to use them as a basis for refining the normative categories we have introduced—such as transposition, colonization, and deliberative innovation. The examples presented here would benefit from further empirical study, but our primary purpose is not to analyze them in depth. Instead, we use them to illustrate and clarify the normative categories at the center of our argument.[2]

'*Decididania: Climate on the Legislative Agenda*' was a multi-stage deliberative project that convened three citizens' assemblies across different municipalities and states in Brazil between October 2022 and February

2023 (Cervellini et al. 2024).[3] The assemblies took place in Salvador (Bahia State), a city of 2.9 million inhabitants; Toritama (Pernambuco State), with a population of 46,000; and Francisco Morato (São Paulo State), home to 178,000 residents. The three assemblies collectively comprised 120 randomly selected citizens, with 40 participants in each experience.

The *Itinerant Citizens' Assembly* (ICA) (Castillo et al. 2024; OECD 2021) was a democratic innovation project implemented by the Bogotá City Council in collaboration with national and international civic organizations between 2020 and 2023. Although the ICA followed the general structure of a citizens' assembly—with random selection, a training phase, facilitated deliberation, and the issuance of policy recommendations—it was designed as an *itinerant* and *sequential* process. The model aimed to preserve the deliberative capacity of small groups while enabling broader participation over time. To promote continuity and cumulative learning, 30% of participants in the second and third chapters were returning members from previous rounds. Across all three chapters, 240 citizens participated, rotating through various stages of training and deliberation.

The *Civic Jury on Anticorruption Policy* in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico, was convened in 2021 by the Coordinating Committee of the State Anticorruption System—a council composed of representatives from various public entities—with the goal of developing recommendations for the state's new anticorruption policy (Castillo & Mejía 2022). The jury consisted of 40 citizens, randomly selected to reflect the state's diversity in terms of gender, age, and geographic location. The selected citizens took part in twelve preparatory sessions, during which they engaged with public servants and subject-matter experts. These sessions were followed by 4 days of structured deliberation. The discussions focused on four main topics: grand corruption, good governance, participation and oversight, and whistleblowing. In the end, the jury produced 35 specific recommendations for the state's anticorruption policy.

Lxs 400 was a deliberative poll conducted by Tribu, a Chilean organization, in collaboration with the Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy, the Chilean Senate, NN Chile, the University of Chile, and the Chilean Association of Municipalities (Felipe Vera et al. 2021; Fishkin et al. 2021). Of the four examples, this was the only one conducted at a national level. After sending out 25,000 invitation letters to Chilean households, the deliberative poll conducted in March 2021 involved a total of 514 Chilean citizens. The primary aim of the deliberative poll was to assess the effects of deliberation on citizens discussing constitutional issues under consideration in the reform process, such as health care and pension reform.

Receptiveness: Fostering global and local dialog in the process of transposition

We defined receptiveness as the capacity of policymakers and organizers to remain open, to listen to criticism, and to adapt during the process of innovation. This quality has two faces: attentiveness to the global community of practice—engaging with advances and critiques in international dialogs on democratic innovation—and attentiveness to the local communities where the innovation will take root. Democratic innovators must balance both, ensuring that their designs respond to global knowledge while remaining grounded in local realities. This dual orientation applies equally to conveners and organizers in the Global South and the Global North.

Notably, these experiences occurred almost simultaneously in four different countries on the continent. By 2019, when the four cases began to emerge, citizens' assemblies had already been developing in North America, Europe, and Australia for roughly 15 years. Large-scale cases, such as the Irish Constitutional Convention (Farrell, Harris & Suiter 2017), had already been implemented, while others, like the French Climate Assembly, were about to be convened. The literature on mini-publics was expanding rapidly, with several books, edited volumes, and a vast number of journal articles—almost all in English. In 2020, the OECD (2020) published its first report on the topic, documenting more than 400 mini-publics in the Global North. By 2019, the organizations and individuals involved in the four examples we examine could draw on this accumulated knowledge to learn and adapt. As we will see, they did not merely 'copy'; they made a conscious effort to engage in thoughtful adaptation and dialog with both global peers and local communities. In the process of transposing these institutions, new 'sounds' emerged. The resulting innovations differ, in important ways, from their Northern counterparts.

Interestingly, the organizers were unaware of each other and had no knowledge of similar cases in Latin America. Now, they collaborate on various projects and, along with others, have formed a community of practice in Latin America. More recently, some of them have collaborated on new projects, such as *Resurgentes*—a UN-funded initiative that organized four climate assemblies in Buenaventura (Colombia), Mar del Plata (Argentina), Bujaru (Brazil), and Nuevo León (Mexico) (Česnulaitytė, Rey & Niño-Aguilar 2025). Despite this, all drew inspiration from Northern references, though they arrived at the concept through different paths—some through academic exposure to mini-publics, others through prior experience with participatory mechanisms. They were aware that they were transposing a foreign institution. The drive to create something 'new' kept organizers moving forward, despite various challenges. Persistence—sometimes seen as stubbornness—was common across all four examples. One organizer described his motivation simply as 'madness,' reflecting the frustration many faced in getting others on board.

All four groups of practitioners maintained contact with international partners while designing their cases and made deliberate efforts to engage in meaningful dialog with other democratic innovators worldwide. Delibera in Brazil was the first Latin American member of Democracy R&D, a global network created in 2018 to promote the use of citizens' assemblies and other civic sortition methods. Lxs 400 was implemented through a collaboration between Chilean civic organizations, public institutions, and the Stanford Center for Deliberative Democracy.

In Mexico, the organizers established an international observatory with members such as Healthy Democracy—a US-based organization known for developing and implementing the Citizens' Initiative Review in Oregon—the OECD & Democracy R&D (Castillo & Mejía 2022). Democracy R&D provided assistance in the development of the methodology for this particular case, and the recruitment process used open-source software developed by the UK-based Sortition Foundation. In Colombia, the organizers held meetings with representatives from the OECD's Democratic Innovations Unit.

The international contacts we refer to were voluntarily initiated by Latin American organizers, and the resulting dialogs were collaborative and mutually enriching. Equally important, these exchanges were complemented by sustained engagement with local communities. In this sense, receptiveness operated on the two levels we previously described: internationally, through horizontal exchanges with global peers; and locally, through deliberative engagement with affected communities and stakeholders. In the Chihuahua Jury, organizers conducted surveys involving 5010 citizens of the state and 11,435 public officials to identify key themes requiring discussion. Similarly, in its sequenced deliberation, the ICA began with a first chapter focused on broad urban planning themes to help define the agenda for later stages. In Chile, the two topics—health and pension reform—were prioritized in a national consultation that the Chilean Association of Municipalities conducted in 2019. In Brazil, the remits of the three assemblies were not imposed by Delibera but emerged through dialog with local officials responsible for implementing the project. Each assembly was tailored to address a distinct issue, aligned with climate change mitigation priorities specific to its locality. Also in Brazil, the organizers introduced an innovative component within the project's governance system called the 'Content Group.' Prior to the commencement of the assemblies, organizers invited dozens of institutions from the three public branches, universities, and interest groups to participate in these groups, one for each assembly. In the Salvador assembly, for instance, 43 stakeholders were invited, of whom 19 accepted the invitation and participated in the group. The Content Group played a crucial role in the decision-making process concerning the methods to be employed in the assemblies. Apart from its involvement in the design phase, the group provided recommendations during implementation, ensured a diverse range of perspectives, assisted in disseminating information about the assembly, and in some cases, aided in preparing materials for the learning phase.

Sensitivity: In the search of a new sound for citizens' assemblies

Sensitivity refers to a demonstrated willingness to adapt innovations to the specific contexts in which they are implemented. All four examples made conscious efforts to adapt the general model of citizens' assemblies to their local contexts rather than simply replicating international examples. Some of these adaptations were driven by financial and legal constraints, as we will explain, while others resulted from a deliberate sensitivity to the local context.

In contrast to European assemblies, which may benefit from substantial budgets, citizens' assemblies in Latin America typically operate within much tighter financial constraints. For instance, the ICA project incurred costs of around $80,000 USD, Decidadania $40,000, and the Chihuahua City Jury $5330. Notably, none of the projects included in this study surpassed the $200,000 mark, a very low amount compared to the OECD (2020) standard. In stark contrast, European assemblies, such as the French ones, incurred costs exceeding five million euros each. Similarly, some American deliberative polls surpassed $2,000,000, and Irish assemblies typically operate around the $1,000,000 mark. The scarcity of funds may pose challenges to upholding deliberative standards, and although cheap deliberation is not a cure-all, it can lead to innovative ideas on cost-effectiveness. For instance, austerity may inspire creative approaches such as organizing meetings in public spaces [e.g., public universities in Bogotá (Nielsen & McDonald-Nelson 2025)], conducting in-person recruitment efforts (Brazil), or employing strategies like golden tickets (Mexico).[4] Budget constraints have consistently led organizers to rely on volunteers to execute mini-publics in the region. Both the Brazilian and Bogotá examples saw active involvement from universities and students who volunteered in various stages, including the design, learning, and deliberative phases.

One legal barrier in all four examples was the payment of economic compensation to participants due to legal restrictions and the legalistic approach of many public administrations in the region. None of these examples could use public funds to pay members. Instead, they had to respond generatively to this challenge. In all four examples, payments were provided by the private sector or international funding, which, in turn, encouraged organizers to build broad alliances to move the cases forward. In Colombia, a coalition of nine civic organizations—both national and international—was formed to create a public innovation laboratory within the City Council, which was responsible for designing and implementing the ICA. The Decididania project organizers also partnered with international cooperation agencies and the three local administrations, which allocated public resources for implementation in the different municipalities.

Beyond local challenges like those mentioned, all four examples showed careful attention to grounding key aspects of citizens' assembly design—such as remits, descriptive criteria, and recruitment methods—in their respective contexts.

In all four examples, the themes and remits of the assemblies were carefully selected to address the most pressing local issues. The Mexican jury focused on corruption—an issue seldom tackled by assemblies in the Global North but especially urgent in a state (Chihuahua) marked by high-profile corruption scandals (Castillo & Mejía 2022). While topics like urban planning and climate change are common in citizens' assemblies (Curato et al. 2024), the discussions in Bogotá and Brazil were tailored

to their specific contexts. For instance, Delibera required each of the three Brazilian municipalities to focus on environmental issues relevant to their local realities—such as the impact of the jeans industry in the case of Toritama. To select these municipalities, Delibera initially drew a random sample of 200 municipalities and then contacted public officials directly to gauge their interest. Ultimately, 45 cities from all five regions of Brazil and 14 of the 27 states applied. To ensure sustainability and true capacity-building, Delibera encouraged municipalities to invest their own resources rather than relying entirely on external support.

Organizers also made substantive modifications and adjustments to the selection process, deviating from international 'standards' in meaningful ways. Let us begin with descriptive criteria—the factors used to stratify the sample and ensure the selection of members from diverse backgrounds. In the Global North, the primary criteria for selecting participants typically include gender, age, and location. A group chosen based on these factors is generally considered descriptively representative of the general population. However, in more unequal contexts, achieving meaningful descriptive representation can be more complex, often requiring the inclusion of additional criteria, particularly socioeconomic status. Without accounting for this factor, an assembly may consist of individuals who vary in gender, age, and location but predominantly come from upper or middle-class backgrounds. From the outset, citizens' assemblies in Latin America recognized the need to incorporate other descriptive criteria and, at times, had to deviate from strict proportionality. For instance, the Chihuahua jury intentionally included non-proportional representation of indigenous groups and LGBTQ+ communities. The ICA placed particular emphasis on the socioeconomic criterion, achieving high levels of proportionality concerning income. Half of the assemblies in Bogotá were composed of low-income citizens, while fewer than 5% consisted of high-income participants.

Finally, one of the most interesting features of some Latin American examples of mini-publics—such as Decidadania, as well as others not included in this study, like the recent 'meta-deliberative' assembly in Bogotá (Česnulaitytė, Rey & Niño-Aguilar 2025)—is the use of in-person recruitment. After facing difficulties in recruiting participants due to limited budgets and insufficient data, the organizers of Decidadania turned to face-to-face recruitment strategies. Mailing letters can be expensive, and the digital divide poses challenges to relying on email. In-person recruitment compels organizers to engage in one-on-one conversations, embedding these exchanges within broader social spaces. Visiting universities, schools, public streets, and workplaces to explain the concept of citizens' assemblies fosters more dialogical engagement than mass mailing. The Brazilian experience with in-person recruitment was later replicated in Bogotá's meta-deliberative assembly and in other Global South contexts, such as India, representing an example of South–South democratic transposition (Castillo et al. 2024).

Generativity

Generativity refers to the ability to spark incrementally new ideas, practices, and models through the process of deliberating with others engaged in promoting democracy. A democratic innovation process that is receptive and sensitive—rather than isolated and uncritical—has far greater potential to generate genuine innovation. This is one of the central aims of deliberative innovation: not merely applying existing models, but improving them through the very process of transposition.

The Latin American cases already implemented offer valuable innovations for both the region and the world, some of which have already been transposed to other parts of the Global South and the Global North. One example is in-person recruitment: instead of relying on databases, mailing lists, or polling firms, organizers—often without access to such resources—go out into the streets, invite people to participate, and then randomly select a stratified sample from those who agree. In-person recruitment is now recognized as a way to enhance the participatory effects of citizens' assemblies by making the process more open and flexible.

Another example is the deliberate deviation from strict proportionality. In some Latin American cases, this approach has been used to ensure the inclusion of groups that would otherwise be underrepresented if selected purely in proportion to the population. Additional innovations include Brazil's creation of a Content Group to involve stakeholders in the design and oversight of the process, and Bogotá's development of a sequenced deliberation model[5]—later adopted, with important variations, by The Democratic Odyssey in Europe (Nicolaidis 2025) and by the Copenhagen Semi-Permanent Climate Assembly (Česnulaitytė, Rey & Niño-Aguilar 2025). The OECD (2021) now recognizes sequenced deliberation as one of the models for institutionalizing public deliberation.

Other innovations, though not examined in this study, are worth noting: the meta-deliberation citizens' assembly in Colombia (Česnulaitytė, Rey & Niño-Aguilar 2025), designed to have randomly selected citizens co-create the design of a future assembly; the adaptation of public venues such as universities for hosting citizens' assemblies—an emerging topic in scholarship on the role of space in shaping deliberative practice (Nielsen & McDonald-Nelson 2025); and the Bujaru assembly's pioneering recruitment strategies to strengthen the inclusion of Indigenous communities in mini-publics. While such innovations merit further normative scrutiny—since they may challenge some of the standard justifications for random selection—they can, at least in their experimental stage, generate creative and contextually appropriate solutions for both the region and other settings.

Conclusion

We would like to conclude this article with a note on the limits of our approach to these democratic transpositions. We do not contend that these four examples are complete exhaustive instances of deliberative innovation. Establishing that would require a much deeper

exploration than we can provide here. What we can affirm is that they exhibited signs of deliberative innovation, both in their engagement with local communities and in their interaction with global deliberative practices. Their organizers sought dialog with international peers—not to replicate models, but to learn, adapt, and respond. When necessary, they made adjustments. When confronted with the realization that certain practices common in affluent countries were not feasible, they sought to adapt their approaches. In all four examples, poverty and inequality played decisive roles in shaping the design. By responding to external critiques and incorporating feedback, they demonstrated receptiveness and generativity. Additionally, through changes in design elements—such as recruitment criteria, stakeholder roles, or participant selection methods—they showed sensitivity to the social and political contexts of their communities. We do not even rule out the possibility of colonization within these very examples or others in the region. The transposition of democratic innovations is a complex phenomenon, where we may encounter both uncritical forms of democratic colonization and genuine deliberative innovation.

Notes

[1] We use examples rather than cases, since our aim is not to conduct case studies but to develop grounded normative political theory (Veloso et al. 2025) based on real-life illustrations. For the treatment of examples to which we adhere, see Dryzek (2025).

[2] Most of the information about these four examples is publicly available in a set of documents we used for this research, primarily including the webpages of the projects and the organizations that promoted these innovations, as well as technical documents listed on these webpages. Most of these materials are in Spanish and Portuguese. Additionally, we consulted some articles and reports on these examples (Castillo et al. 2024; Castillo & Mejía 2022; Cervellini et al. 2024; Česnulaitytė, Rey & Niño-Aguilar 2025; Curato et al. 2024; Dean et al. 2024; Felipe Vera et al. 2021; Fishkin et al. 2021; Guanumen-Parra & Núñez-Amórtegui 2020; Romão Netto & Cervellini 2021). Finally, to clarify a few issues, we conducted open interviews with two of the organizers involved in these projects.

[3] As Silvia Cervellini, Executive Director of Delibera Brasil—the organization that led the project and specializes in designing and implementing citizens' assemblies—notes, 'although Brazil has many participatory institutions, mini-publics remain a format with little usage in the country' (Cervellini, 742). In recent years, however, a number of cases have begun to emerge, revealing interesting trends. Since 2017, approximately ten mini-publics have been held in Brazil—most of them at the local level, though the country has also participated in two international initiatives: one regional and one global. These mini-publics have primarily focused on urban planning and environmental issues. Examples include the ReageSP project by the Tide Setubal Foundation in São Paulo, which convened two mini-publics in different parts of the city, where randomly selected citizens deliberated on strategic planning for their communities (Romão Netto & Cervellini 2021; Sampaio 2023); a mini-public in the Jardim Lapenna neighborhood of São Paulo focused on an urban development plan (Romão Netto & Cervellini 2021); the Bujaru Climate Assembly, organized as part of the Resurgentes project, which also held assemblies in Buenaventura (Colombia), Mexico, and Argentina (*Resurgentes: Uniendo Voces Para Enfrentar El Cambio Climático* 2024); and Brazil's participation in the Global Citizens' Assembly on Genome Editing (Dryzek et al. 2020).

[4] The selection process began with a random draw of 10,000 citizens, who received invitations—dubbed "golden tickets," inspired by Charlie and the Chocolate Factory—to participate. From this pool, 40 participants and their alternates were chosen.

[5] The ICA model emerged in response to a legitimacy concern that gained traction in the field by 2019, coinciding with the initiation of design efforts by the Bogotá City Council. This concern was rooted in the perception that having only a few dozen or even a few hundred citizens might be deemed inadequately representative and democratic, particularly in cities and countries with populations numbering in the millions (Lafont 2015; Parkinson 2006). One potential solution is to sequence deliberation, as attempted by the ICA. By organizing different 'chapters', each of a reasonable size, more people can be included in the long run. While each chapter may have at most hundreds of participants, the assembly, over time, can admit thousands of citizens.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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