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Chapter 3
Global facilitation revisited: The many stages of climate assemblies

Abstract: Climate assemblies are gaining attention as a means to respond to the climate crisis democratically. While much research has focused on the design and outcomes of mini-publics, the role of facilitators –especially outside Western contexts– remains underexplored. The Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis (GA), implemented during COP26, offers a unique case for examining facilitation in global deliberative forums. Designed to include 100 participants selected globally, the GA aimed to deliberate on how humanity can fairly and effectively address the climate crisis. Facilitators played a critical role in navigating the GA's complexity, which required adapting to unforeseen challenges during its online, transnational deliberation. Far from merely implementing pre-designed scripts, facilitators improvised and redesigned processes in response to participants' needs, shifting from their initial frontstage role to co-designers in the backstage. These adaptations revealed enablers and barriers to global deliberation, including the challenges of fostering collective learning, managing diverse perspectives, and ensuring inclusivity. This chapter highlights the importance of including facilitators in process design from the outset and reframing their role as reflective practitioners, based on 19 semi-structured interviews with facilitators of the GA. We argue that flexibility, shared ownership, and continuous collaboration are essential for enabling deliberation at global scale.

Keywords: facilitation, co-design, climate assemblies, global deliberation, environmental governance

1 Introduction

In recent years, climate assemblies have increasingly been in the spotlight as a means to achieve a more democratic climate transition. Much scholarly attention has been paid to the internal and external features of these mini-publics and their evaluation. However, with a few important exceptions (e. g., Doerr 2018; Escobar 2019; Landwehr 2014; Moore 2012; Schneidemesser, Oppold, and Stasiak 2023), their facilitation and the perspective of those in charge of enabling deliberation among participants have been understudied, especially outside Western contexts. The Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis (GA) offers a unique chance to reflect on the role of facilitators in enabling transnational deliberation.

The GA was implemented in the framework of the United Nations Conference of the Parties (COP26). It engaged 100 participants from all over the world to deliberate

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the question: "*How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?*" The participants were selected with the aim of ensuring diversity regarding age, gender, education, and geography. To fulfil the latter requirement, 100 geographic points were chosen based on numerous demographic datasets, and participants were recruited from within 200 kilometres of each geographic point (Global Assembly Team 2022, 48–76).

The ambition to carry out a deliberative process online and at a global scale posed numerous challenges beyond the complex sortition process, including experimentation with different design choices and a considerable degree of adaptability throughout the process itself. Decisions taken backstage influenced frontstage dynamics, namely how discussions on the climate and ecological crises emerged (or did not emerge) among participants. The deliberations were fraught with challenges, including the participants' reluctance to elicit diverging opinions, as noted by participants[1] and observing researchers. While our chapter will not address the constraints of deliberation within the GA specifically, our analysis will be grounded in and limited by the prevalence of collective learning over collective deliberation in this deliberative process (Curato et al. 2023, 67–80).

Focusing specifically on the question "*How was the role of facilitators*[2] *enacted within the Global Assembly?*", this chapter aims to better identify and discuss responses to the particular challenges of facilitating deliberative forums at the global level. The reasons for this focus are twofold. First, facilitators play a crucial role in enabling deliberation among participants and responding to many of the limitations in group deliberation. Facilitators are supposed to make processes "more inclusive, more comprehensive, more careful to avoid deception, suppression, and coercion" (Dryzek 2000, in Moore 2012, 148). Understanding their role within the GA is a key element in understanding the possibility of global deliberation. Second, for those participating in the GA, facilitators were also the most distinct face of the process. A better grasp of the role of facilitation within in-group deliberations is crucial to enhance the engagement of participants in future global assemblies.

We will argue that facilitators enacted their role by redefining it gradually. We describe how facilitators advocated for impromptu transformations of the process design to meet participants' needs while pursuing the envisaged goals of the GA. Our analysis

1 Survey responses (final survey n=70) to the question "Do you think that other participants had different views than yours?" revealed that 55% of participants believed that only a few of them held differing views, while 21% indicated that none did. Overall, respondents largely concurred that either a minority or none of the participants had perspectives different from their own.

2 The Global Assembly's Report refers to facilitators as *breakout facilitators* since they were enabling deliberation among small groups of participants. There were also *plenary co-facilitators* for the large sessions (gathering 100 participants) and *cluster facilitators*, organisations tasked with "recruiting, training and supporting" different members of the Global Assembly's implementation team (Global Assembly Team 2022, 59). We will focus on *breakout facilitators* since deliberation among participants occurred largely in small groups, and participants spent most of their time within these breakout rooms (i.e., digital spaces for small-group deliberation) (Global Assembly Team 2022, 108).

shows that during the online sessions with participants, facilitators often improvised by going off-script and by encouraging new types of interaction among those in their breakout rooms (i. e., digital spaces for small-group deliberation). As challenges emerged, they set up new digital stages for learning among facilitators and strengthened ties with and between participants.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. First, building upon literature on co-design and facilitation, as well as global deliberation, we briefly lay the foundations for understanding facilitation and how it was performed in the backstage and frontstage of the GA. Second, we discuss the enablers and barriers experienced by facilitators within the GA as we analyse the backstage, frontstage and emerging stages where facilitators enacted their roles. Finally, by critically exploring the facilitators' roles within the GA, we revisit the role of facilitation within global deliberative forums. We argue that shared ownership, room for improvisation, and multi-stage deliberation ought to be considered good practices within global deliberation.

1.1 A note on deliberation and mini-publics

Throughout this chapter, we follow a minimalist definition of deliberation, understood as a core democratic principle of mutual communication "that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern" (Mansbridge 2015, 27). In doing so, we recognise that deliberative forms or 'phenotypes' vary quite dramatically – not only because of the inherently different nature of "matters of common concern", but also due to the varying social, geographical, and institutional contexts within which deliberation happens. Mini-publics, which we are focusing on given the nature of the GA, are defined as the "*near-random* selection [of participants] alongside structured (or facilitated) deliberation between [them]" (Ryan and Smith 2014, 19). Mini-publics are often tailored to a specific situation by adjusting the design and facilitation of the process, including the framing of the issue, participant selection strategies, and their interaction modes.

Certain design choices have gained prominence in Western countries and have become mainstream practices for the implementation of mini-publics, regardless of the overarching goal of the process. For instance, whenever the general public can be considered to be the adequate "stakeholder group" to deal with an issue, some form of random selection has become a common and useful recruitment strategy (Flanigan et al. 2021; Gąsiorowska 2023; Pilet et al. 2023). Other decisions regarding the design of mini-publics are more prone to variation: for example, the duration or the type of facilitation provided for citizens' assemblies, which can span from only a couple of days in duration to several weeks or months. And, while most forums are facilitated by skilled professionals, others might rely more on participants to organise themselves (Schneidemesser et al. 2023).

2 Facilitation

Facilitation during the GA occurred within different stages. In this section, we offer a theoretical overview of our understanding of facilitation, with the aim of grounding our analysis of the changing roles of breakout facilitators – originally tasked with enabling deliberation among participants. We use the concepts of frontstage and backstage facilitation as an analytic framework for examining the role of facilitation in the GA.

Facilitation is often referred to as the act of leading discussions and continuously interacting with participants during a deliberative forum (Moore 2012, 147) to enforce accessibility, inclusivity, and impact (see Dryzek 2002; Moore 2012; Escobar 2019). However, those deliberative interactions are only the visible side of facilitation, known in the literature as the 'frontstage' (Goffman 1966, in Escobar 2014). This refers to the moment and space in which participants discuss a specific issue guided by a facilitator.

Scholars have argued that we need to move beyond studying the frontstage of deliberation to better understand the often invisible 'backstage work' of facilitating deliberative forums (Escobar 2019; Byner et al. 2023). Backstage work includes defining, "through multiple and fine-grained design choices (e.g. list of invitees, agenda, setting of the room), the rationale, framing, and rules operating in the collaborative setting" (Molinengo 2023, 103). Understanding how processes are made to enable deliberation, the literature argues, is as important as the actual deliberation among assembly members. The argument we present follows this logic and positions facilitation as the combination of process design and interaction mode which ultimately enables deliberation. In particular, we focus on how breakout facilitators influence the backstage or improvise new stages for deliberative interaction and collaborative learning.

'Process design' refers to the way that the interaction between participants is planned 'backstage', akin to what Escobar (2015) and Molinengo and Stasiak (2020) call "scripting" and "setting the stage". It often occurs in conjunction with the conveners of the deliberative process (be they civil society organisations or institutions), thematic experts and other key stakeholders. The process design or 'script' outlines the question guiding the process, forms an agenda, and identifies communicative, thematic and facilitation methodologies that seek to engage a group of participants in productive deliberation (Molinengo and Stasiak 2020, 4; for an example of a facilitation script see: Annex 3 in WHO 2024, 87).

Since climate assemblies, and deliberative forums more broadly, are often embedded within existing policy or power structures, these design choices are to a large extent political decisions. Such choices determine who should be included in the deliberations, the remit of the process (see Chapter 2 of this book), and the commitment to implement citizens' recommendations. Therefore, in the design process preceding deliberation, critical tensions often arise around the forum's embeddedness, its purview and goals, and the extent to which its design is planned to ensure inclusion, interaction, and impact – the three expectations of facilitation identified by Escobar (2019, 182).

The 'interaction mode' (Molinengo and Stasiak 2020) describes how participants and facilitators engage and interact in a collaborative process by following the process design. The performances of the script are led by facilitators and carried out on the frontstage of deliberative forums. Facilitators have a particular competence and know-how in conducting deliberations, sometimes referred to as "processual expertise" (Moore 2012) or "participatory expertise" (Fischer 2003). The facilitator's role is that of an enabler and their interventions should ideally be "invisible" to participants (Lee and Lee 2015, 114). In deliberative settings, many of the facilitators' efforts consists of appreciating and activating various forms of knowledge, values, and reflection held by participants (Forester 2013; Quick and Sandfort 2017).

Facilitation on the frontstage seeks to ensure that the planned deliberation process is carried out and the respective goals of deliberation are met to the best extent possible. Shared cultural and social norms help to guide interactions in deliberations within specific cultural spheres. However, such culturally specific cues for speaking and listening, expectations of who contributes what type of ideas, social hierarchies, and other conventions that in local circumstances help to enable, manage, or break certain "norms and patterns [of behaviour] deemed appropriate in a given context" (Escobar 2019, 184) are less reliable at the global level. The broad spectrum of expectations of how to behave, when to ask questions, what questions are appropriate, and what type of personal information is appropriate to share or ask, as well as other aspects of interpersonal interaction across different cultures, add to the complexity of facilitation in a global setting.

Further challenges arise when frontstage interactions occur online. These include: the limited range of communication channels (with a focus on verbal expression); difficulty in monitoring the level of involvement and response of participants; the possibility and temptation to switch off the camera; technical difficulties like poor connection quality; interruptions; and the influence of respective ambient conditions (including noise and parallel responsibilities) on participants. On the other hand, there are some advantages. For example, hierarchies might become flatter on the screen – social identity cues, as referred to by Rhee and Kim (2009), may be harder to identify in an online context.

2.1 The backstage: Process design in the Global Assembly

Designing a global assembly against the background of a complex international context and a floundering climate governance system is a complex endeavour. The GA was a process convened by civil society organisations (CSOs). Although it had the endorsement of the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres, the convening team was not appointed, nor backed, by any democratically established institution, as many local or national climate assemblies. This had two important implications.

On the one hand, due to their informal nature mini-publics are rarely regulated by law. As a consequence, their impacts depend on the power and commitment of conven-

ers to create ways of enacting recommendations or securing other effective outcomes. CSOs, who were the initiators of the GA, lack specific means or formal powers to decide upon recommendations produced by the GA. This significantly limited the potential impact of the process in general. On the other hand, this also meant that critical decision-making on the process design was carried out by participation professionals, in iterative interactions with thematic experts, but with no institutional oversight.

Many decisions around process design depend on the context and bear consequences for facilitation. For instance, the selection of participants, which is a major focus of the design of mini-publics, directly affects the shape of the group that is expected to exchange and deliberate. In European countries, randomised selection or sortition is considered a best practice and is often carried out using residency registers, addresses, electoral rolls, or telephone directories. At the global level, randomised selection presents a challenge because of the difficulty of developing a global recruitment method. This, concretely, means that dominant institutional designs are confronted with various practical and/or structural barriers, such as the absence of comprehensive databases of country residents (Ross and Morán 2023).

A multi-stage process was used to select participants in the Global Assembly[3]. First, geographical points were randomly selected based on population density. Then, individuals were recruited via snowball sampling in the territories that won the location lottery, which surprisingly did not use stratification to account for those most affected by climate and ecological crises (Curato et al. 2023, 47). Finally, participants were selected via lottery while accounting for a descriptive representation of age, gender, education levels, and attitudes toward climate change worldwide (Global Assembly Team 2022, 51). The diverse composition of the deliberative groups had direct implications for facilitators as it determined, for example, the number of languages in use during deliberations.

The multilingual context in which the Global Assembly unfolded brought about another set of complex design choices. Designers decided that deliberations would be conducted in English. However, 64 % of assembly members came from other linguistic contexts and needed translation to participate (Global Assembly Team 2022, 98). To adjust to this design choice, new actors beyond facilitators were introduced to the frontstage of deliberation: translators and 'community hosts' (that is, members of local organisations who served as points of liaison with the GA's organisers) supported assembly members by accompanying them during the learning, deliberation, and evaluation of the GA. Linguistic barriers affected the mode of facilitation, as most verbal communication with and among participants had to be mediated via third parties – translators and community hosts.

Other key process design choices taken backstage regarded convening deliberations in multiple time zones; drafting a booklet for participants with key content to in-

3 The provenance of the algorithm underpinning the sortition process is contested but this is not a focal point of our analysis.

form deliberations; systematising the results of small-group deliberations by merging and consolidating the information collected by note-takers (Global Assembly Team 2022, 83, 92, 100, 106, 112); and, particularly important for facilitators, drafting the script for the weekly deliberations amongst assembly members. Many of the process design features remained similar to other mini-publics, including facilitation mechanisms that encourage listening and sharing, knowledge-inputs presented by experts, combining personal reflection with collective creation, keeping participants focused on the task at hand, and other strategies to move the process forward (Landwehr 2014; Mansbridge et al. 2006).

2.2 The frontstage: Interaction modes in the Global Assembly

Throughout the GA, the interactions were heavily influenced by the digital setting. Participants joined small-group deliberations and plenary sessions in real-time through their phones or computers; from their homes; or from places where they could have internet access (Curato et al. 2023, 99). Disruptions in internet connectivity or translation difficulties contributed to the challenges of frontstage interactions. Although it was not intended that facilitators should address these issues, the task of coordinating solutions or workarounds often fell to them. Facilitators were also responsible for developing an atmosphere among participants that would be conducive to deliberation. This entailed establishing rules of interaction to ensure that deliberations were open and not dominated by certain members.

The GA was designed to have different sets of synchronous deliberation across multiple time zones. This meant that participants met roughly three to four times per week over 12 weeks (Global Assembly Team 2022, 100–110). They met two to three times per week to deliberate within small groups, during times that were accessible for their respective time zones. Small breakout groups consisted of a facilitator, a note-taker, four to six assembly members, and their translators and community hosts. Participants also attended weekly online plenary sessions, where plans and results were consolidated and the next steps communicated. Plenary sessions also included small group moments so assembly members could interact with other members who were not part of their regular breakout groups.

Small-group deliberation between GA members was often characterised by phases of learning, discussion, and voting. Learning could be supported by reading a section of the information booklet provided by the GA's conveners or listening to a video recorded by expert witnesses. Questions were posed by facilitators depending on the topic at hand and the goals of that particular deliberative session. For example, when discussing fossil fuel subsidies among a breakout group, facilitators asked participants about their experiences with the impacts of these and their positions. As participants spoke, note-takers would record their ideas, which would then be passed on to editors, who gathered and systematised the information. Based on notes from all 20 breakout groups, editors drafted the 'People's Declaration' for COP26, which was again discussed

by each breakout group. After three revisions based on reactions in the breakout groups, the assembly members voted on the different sections of the People's Declaration, which were then either accepted for submission or rejected and further discussed and revised.

Eight participants and four members of the Global Assembly team participated digitally and in person in various events during Glasgow's COP26. The experience and the results of the GA were shared with government representatives participating in the formal negotiations in the Blue Zone. The results of the GA's deliberations were also presented to the general public and COP attendees at a prominent Green Zone event.

3 Methods

To understand how facilitators enacted their roles during the Global Assembly, we conducted 19 semi-structured interviews with facilitators of small-group deliberation. We contacted the 20 breakout facilitators via email and 19 agreed to the interview (a 95% response rate). Respondents came from East Africa (3), East Asia (1), Europe (4), Latin America and the Caribbean (3), North America (2), South-East Asia (5), and South Asia (1). The interviews were conducted online via video calls in English or Spanish. With the interviewee's permission, these interviews were recorded, transcribed, and anonymised.

The interview guide was developed using a hybrid approach combining both deductive and inductive steps (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane 2006). Deductively, we developed a structure of categories in which we were interested based on the existing literature on facilitation. Then, after observing breakout-room deliberations during the GA, and examining detailed process plans for each session, we adjusted and honed these categories and questions to align our focus with the unfolding process and facilitators' experiences. Responses were coded in MAXQDA, following a coding scheme built in parallel to the interview guidelines, also constructed deductively based on the literature and refined inductively after observing GA deliberations.

Table 3.1: Deductive and inductive analysis

Step	Strategy	Description	Example
1	Deductive categorisation of interview responses (following the interview protocol)	Analysis of each response seeking to produce categories of analysis	Q: Can you tell us about a particularly easy session or activity you had to facilitate? A: A session in which participants linked the story in the information booklet to the effects of climate change in their territories Category: Challenging/Easy Sessions

Table 3.1 *(Continued)*

Step	Strategy	Description	Example
2	Inductive categorisation	Analysis of recurring responses seeking to produce codes and categories	"Links to participants' territories, food systems, and families" was a recurring response when describing a good deliberation among participants. Proposed category: Enablers of deliberation

We also use data from a panel survey comprising six questionnaires for assembly members conducted before, during, and after the GA. The surveys contained closed and open questions about their deliberative experience. These surveys were led and developed by Hannah Werner and Nicole Curato with the support of Azucena Morán (Curato et al. 2023, 158) and were presented to participants in collaboration with the GA's core delivery team. The table below shows the survey's response rates (n=100).

Table 3.2: Data from Global Assembly's Evaluation Report (Curato et al. 2023, 159)

Survey	Response Rate
Pre-Survey (Induction Session)	91
Session 1.2P	86
Session 3.1B	96
Session 3.4P	27
Session 4.2P	79
Final Survey (Final Session 5.6)	70

4 Analysis: Facilitators' changing stages

Most design choices, including the selection of participants and the remit of the Assembly, were initially taken backstage by the convening team with the support of their advisory committees (Global Assembly 2022, 257). Facilitators, most of whom had considerable facilitation experience, were given detailed scripts for each session. However, most reported that implementation challenges emerged during deliberations due to the rapid pace of the sessions and the inaccessibility of the content presented by expert witnesses. In response, breakout facilitators intuitively moved from the frontstage of deliberation to the backstage to engage in editing the process design as the GA unfolded.

While it was not originally intended that facilitators would alternate between the backstage and frontstage of the GA, this soon became a crucial part of the process. As breakout facilitators were challenged by various aspects of the process design, they started to intervene in the interaction mode enabled by specific facilitation methods and the script of the GA. Their interventions, which remained largely non-binding suggestions, occurred during weekly meetings. These frontstage actors also integrated new facilitation techniques by sharing their experiences and recommendations backstage during weekly meetings and in parallel through WhatsApp groups.

While the facilitators could not alter key parameters such as the remit, the selection of participants, the accessibility of content presented by expert witnesses, the goals of the sessions, or the amount of support provided by the convening team, translators, and community hosts, they did exercise considerable influence at the micro-level, ensuring that the voices present in each group had equal opportunity to participate and be included. The facilitators mitigated failing design choices, enabled new interaction modes, and encouraged collective learning between and among the frontstage and the backstage actors through re-scripting, improvisation, and the integration of new deliberative stages created in parallel to the process.

4.1 Backstage challenges and re-scripting

Most facilitators reported that their experiences with the core team (the group of participation experts convening the GA) were very positive. However, concerns regarding the overstretched capacities of members of the core team often emerged among facilitators. Those interviewed described the organising team as “sleep-deprived” (Interviewees 3, 5), providing “24/7 support” (Interviewee 12) or “fire-fighting” (Interviewee 9). The need for high levels of responsiveness from the core team was often linked to their initial control over the process design. As reported in the interviews, the facilitators, who worked directly with the participants, were not involved in the initial scripting of the process.

Therefore, while the process plan was perceived as a detailed, clear, useful, and standardised tool that got everybody on the same page, it was also referred to as someone else’s work. Apart from one facilitator who described being brought into the process design group, the rest of the facilitators pointed out that they had not been involved in the co-design of the process and thus were missing a sense of ownership.

In the beginning, the process design seemed “carved in stone” (Interviewee 10) and certain questions were sometimes even read out loud word by word when presented to assembly members. Facilitators describe studying the process plan, which was referred to by most facilitators as “the script” or even as a “bible” (Interviewee 5) or “lifeline” (Interviewee 7). Some reviewed the document multiple times, read it out loud using a second computer, or shared it with participants using slides.

Lack of engagement in the design of the GA often led to confusion around the overall process plan. For instance, one facilitator noted that the reasons why certain topics

were selected over others were unclear. Two facilitators expressed that they neither understood the overall picture nor knew what would happen after issuing the People's Declaration. Others mentioned not having access to the high-level objectives of the GA nor knowing from the beginning what the role of the editors was in the drafting of the People's Declaration.

Facilitators expressed feeling both supported and surveilled by the core team or researchers coming to observe the sessions they were facilitating. Although these observers were expected to keep their cameras and microphones off to avoid any possible distraction or disturbance, their presence did affect the way facilitation was conducted and how participants' questions about climate issues were addressed. While most of the facilitators were experienced with facilitation, many were unfamiliar with climate issues and had to review content on the climate crisis as well as the process plan before facilitating.

In the face of these numerous challenges, facilitators adopted a strategy of re-scripting and advocating for edits in the process design during weekly meetings with organisers and exchanging facilitation practices among themselves. In doing so, the Global Assembly became a learning experience for both the participants and facilitators. During the interviews, the majority of facilitators highlighted the importance of their weekly meetings with the core team, where they could discuss the small-group deliberations, as well as the WhatsApp groups created by facilitators to exchange experiences. Key learning moments among them encouraged them to increasingly suggest edits to the GA's script, both in terms of design and facilitation strategies.

> I think, by the fourth or fifth session, we begin to speak up a little bit more, to provide feedback. 'You know, it would be helpful if you had a bit more space. Twenty minutes is definitely not enough. It's not going to work because we have people from diverse backgrounds, diverse languages. We need more conversation space'. (Interviewee 3)

They also appreciated the openness of the core team to consider some suggestions made by facilitators. As one interviewee put it:

> I then thought about how valuable it was, the humility with which they did the process. Because it isn't simple: imagining this, building this, finding the funding, doing all of the work, and suddenly one day they [the facilitators] come and tell you 'this isn't working'. And they [the core team] had the openness to say: 'OK, let's rethink it'. (Interviewee 15)

The ambivalence evident in this statement is a direct symptom of having frontstage facilitators solely in the role of 'executors' of plans made backstage by others. Separating frontstage and backstage roles prevents facilitators from having ownership of the whole process, leading to something of a principal-agent conundrum (Gailmard 2014): the core team contracted the facilitators to conduct certain tasks; as the process unfolded, the facilitators began taking on new roles to adjust the process design along the way and thus moved beyond the scope of initial tasks. The facilitators started pro-

viding feedback and suggesting or asking for changes in how the facilitation –for which they were responsible– is carried out.

4.2 Frontstage challenges and the potential of improvisation

The GA was described by some facilitators as a formative experience (Interviewee 14); a series of ”enlightening” and ”learning” sessions (Interviewee 2); ”a chance [for people] to engage with the material” (Interviewee 4); and an opportunity to amplify the value of deliberation (Interviewee 1). In the post-deliberation questionnaire, some participants described the GA as a place to discuss and give opinions, ”help write the People’s Declaration” and ”debate solutions to problems,”; but also as ”being in school”; a place to have ”illuminating sessions”; a space ”bringing basic knowledge”; a moment to ”give reflections and views on the deliberations from experts”; and a place in which ”facilitators collected responses”.

Despite the presence of certain enabling conditions, deliberation was characterised by its school-like conditions and lack of disagreement and contention within groups (see Curato et al. 2023), which often constituted the most challenging sessions for facilitators. Many facilitators described the absence of disagreement as they pointed to time constraints and the content’s lack of accessibility and legibility, as well as what they perceived as the one-sided nature of the information provided prior to the deliberation. Diverging opinions among participants occurred mainly on an exceptional basis and largely reflected divides between developed countries and the majority world. For instance, facilitators mentioned topics such as the coal phase-out and the real-life consequences it had for members from certain developing countries.

> It often happened that I felt people were repeating the text [given to them]. They would say the same thing in different ways. What was written there, but in other words. Whenever you wanted to know what they thought or how they felt, it just didn’t [work]. (Interviewee 15)

Facilitators tried to break with the lecturer/students dynamics, and thus to avoid deliberation occurring as a conversation only between the facilitator and participants, instead of deliberation among assembly members. These efforts were enabled, often, by going off-script and building collective ties within the group – for instance, by sharing photos or images; finding links to people’s lives, celebrations, and territories; talking about family and food; and using forms of non-verbal expression like music and dancing: ‘*For example, my group bonded over music, so we had group playlists that we played during our breaks, and everybody got to throw in their favourite song and it made them very happy.*’ (Interviewee 10)

Additionally, improvisation occurred as facilitators decided to edit the script on the spot. For example, they extended the amount of time originally given to an activity in the script, or dropped digital exercises that were incompatible with the unequal digital literacy skills in their group. The ability to improvise only when needed was often

linked to facilitators' clear commitment to the GA's participants. Interviewees described facilitation as a responsibility (Interviewee 12); as creating a sense of "your opinion counts" among participants (Interviewee 2); and as "enabling" and creating a "safe environment" for deliberation (Interviewees 3, 10). Necessary improvisations were also enabled and controlled by the accessibility of other facilitators through WhatsApp groups, as well as the presence of note-takers who created "a dynamic of co-responsibility" (Interviewee 14) with facilitators and supported their work in the small-group sessions.

A variety of challenges emerged in the frontstage that required on-the-spot improvisation. Facilitators described concerns about community hosts and/or translators relaying responses that were not actually given by participants; directly responding to questions by participants; or trying to influence the deliberation. Some facilitators sought to tackle these challenges with improvised solutions, for example by talking to community hosts and setting boundaries for the discussion or even directly correcting translations of participants' statements.

Meaningful deliberation was often enabled by off-script improvisation, on-the-spot editing of the script, and *ad lib* adoption of the roles of translators and community hosts. However, these reactions were not enough to overcome some obstacles inherent to the design of the GA. The most common challenges experienced by facilitators were time constraints, connectivity issues, content accessibility/legibility, and concerns regarding the quality of translation. Concerns about participants' weariness were not only related to the digital platform (Zoom) fatigue but to GA members who joined the process late in the evening or after entire workdays. Facilitators also described GA members having to temporarily drop out and come back to the deliberation or simultaneously face catastrophic circumstances such as extreme weather events, bereavement, or escalating security/political concerns in their territories (Veloso et al. forthcoming).

4.3 New challenges, new stages

Besides the backstage and frontstage initially envisaged by the organisers, parallel, digital stages were created throughout the GA that connected facilitators, community hosts, and assembly members. Some of these were closer to the backstage, some to the frontstage and others linking both. Initially, the core team encouraged facilitators to create WhatsApp groups among those in specific time zones. These parallel groups allowed experienced facilitators from all over the world to share their experiences, methods, and strategies, as well as content that would clarify questions on the topic to be deliberated.

Some facilitators also created WhatsApp groups together with others they considered to be particularly proactive, experienced, and like-minded in their ambition to shape the process in the best way possible. Members used these groups to discuss issues that they felt would distract the larger group. These parallel learning spaces en-

abled facilitators in different time zones to prevent the same challenges from arising again and again across the GA.

> We had sessions happening [throughout] 20 hours, depending on the time zone [where] it was happening. Many times, we got some feedback just before our session, based on the experience of the facilitator who had started that session earlier [than us]. So, there was some real-time feedback that kept flowing in, which then helped [us] to find ways of doing things during our sessions. (Interviewee 11)

One facilitator created a group with their community hosts to send them reminders and inform them about upcoming deliberations. Another created a group for participants to address the challenges that arose when community hosts failed to attend the deliberations. Some facilitators expressed concerns regarding community hosts' reliability when it came to, for example, sending the information package to participants before the deliberations. Creating direct channels of communication with participants responded to this challenge and helped breakout groups gain trust and strengthen ties despite language barriers.

> I would talk to a person from [West Asia]. This person didn't speak English at all, and I don't know how, but we talked on WhatsApp and they'd send me [a photo of] the catch they made that morning before the assembly [while fishing]. It was amazing. (Interviewee 14)

The communication channels described above developed organically into new stages for facilitation and deliberation as the GA process unfolded. They were used both for *ad hoc* interventions when facilitation-related challenges had to be met quickly, as well as for the gradual establishment of a community of practice among facilitators. When it came to facilitation, these emerging stages helped tighten relationships among assembly members, beyond what had been possible within their Zoom breakout groups and shared sessions. The emergence of new stages in response to new challenges illustrates Cornwall's argument that invited/invented spaces are not static, and they are constantly being shaped by the unfolding dynamics of the process (2002).

5 Discussion

Convenors frequently view the facilitation of deliberative processes as the provision of a service. Facilitators have specific expertise –they are people who can get acquainted with a script developed backstage to involve participants in deliberation at the frontstage. However, this approach may leave much potential untapped in efforts to enable (global) deliberation. This was the case with the GA.

The collective narrative that emerges out of the interviews with facilitators presents the GA as a complex endeavour. The facilitators' original task was to moderate the interactive sessions with GA participants; that is, to be active at the frontstage of the process. It soon turned out, however, that the complexity of global deliberation

could not be fully foreseen and accounted for in the initial process design, under which the task of supervising the deliberations was to be outsourced to professionals, who would follow a clearly defined script –reinforcing the idea of facilitators as service-providers or (sub-)contractors. In fact, these global deliberations called for facilitators who understood their role as that of "reflective practitioners" (Forester 1999) who see themselves as co-designers and attentive 'hosts' for the conversations of their 'guests' (participants) in the sessions they supported.

This resulted in interesting dynamics emerging among facilitators, who initially reported not feeling considered in process design, but increasingly entered the backstage by editing the process and introducing improvisation into the script. Ultimately, facilitators created new stages to digest, deliberate, and provide follow-up after each session. Developing and coordinating these new elements firmly rooted facilitator activity in the backstage, while their original purpose (or mandate) was largely frontstage activity.

Separating frontstage and backstage roles led facilitators to increasingly deviate from the initial plan. At times, they would negotiate changes with the core team. Other times, they would simply carry out the changes as they facilitated. However, facilitation –understood as the practical means to enable deliberation– is such a crucial element in citizens' assemblies that its design cannot be separated from its implementation. Good facilitation, which leads to actual deliberation among participants, is highly dependent on improvisation, adaptation, and lively dynamics that vary according to the needs of each group. The need for openness and adaptability in the facilitation process requires convenors of deliberative processes to plan for the unexpected. In practice, this means that the process needs a governance structure which incorporates facilitation as a key dimension of the deliberative process, at least on an equal footing with other elements of the process, such as recruitment choices or output expectations.

Including facilitators in backstage work from the outset could enhance ownership and better adapt the script to the needs of participants. Experienced facilitators may be more aware of the dynamics that emerge during processes, and advocate for building flexibility into the script to accommodate these contingencies. Against the tendency to perceive and describe deliberative processes as something that *was designed*, *organised*, *facilitated,* or *run* (see critical discussion in Escobar 2019), our study reaffirms the importance of an agent-sensitive perspective.

In that sense, better results can be expected when facilitators are invited to co-develop the process and can bring their expertise, experience, and knowledge of diverse local contexts –and this on a dynamic, ongoing basis until the deliberation is over. Including facilitators in backstage development would not only guarantee a more thorough understanding, but also co-ownership. Even in processes with very detailed scripts, facilitators will need to react to emerging challenges and find suitable responses to whatever is happening within the group. They need to be certain of where their mandate (and that of the deliberative process) ends. This remains a creative activity, where the ability to react on the basis of thorough understanding, soft skills, and empathy lets facilitators "follow from the front" (Moore 2012).

Taken as a point of departure for further analysis, the collaboration among facilitators of the GA, which unfolded in a bottom-up mode in reaction to a shared need for collegial support and exchange, and contributed to strengthening the quality of the process, shows the importance of understanding facilitation (also) through a 'community of practice' lens. The contrasting metaphor of a 'market of practitioners' characterises more technocratic, individualised versions of facilitation practice, which are present within the emerging industry of participation and emphasise competition among those who are proficient in facilitation practices. As such, they contrast with the emancipatory traditions of facilitation and community organising, which tend to be more oriented towards cooperation, resilience, and (de)liberation.

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