




# A Case Study of Institutionalizing People's Assembly in Nigeria

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## What is the problem? (what is the problem with democracy that could be solved by institutionalizing the People's Assembly)

Participation is at the core of democracies around the world, but its application may vary greatly in terms of quality or type. For a developing democracy like Nigeria and most democracies in Africa, the most common kind of political participation in our democracy is electoral participation with voters voting to elect their leaders. As citizens, we go to vote, seeking to choose our representatives and believing that through our votes we can directly influence those who will represent us in government. However, democracy is beyond the votes and elections. It extends to the quality of governance, the ability to influence policies and ensure that governmental decisions have a direct impact on the people. The pro-democracy movement in Africa in the 1990's presented a lot of hope for the people on the prospect of a democracy where the voices of the people are heard. With the challenge of poor governance and the growing perception that democracy is failing to deliver its dividends, there are more questions about the value of democracy, the value of representation and the "we voted" and "so what" questions. This is further reflected in lower voter turnout, mistrust of political leaders, fractured relationship between government and the people and the disinterest in engaging government.

Citizen participation is central to a functioning democracy. The involvement of citizens in the democratic process is an essential part of democracy. However, often, citizens find it difficult to participate in the governance process either because the spaces or channels of engagement are either non-existent or ineffective, politicised or not trusted or simply exclusionary. This has contributed to growing apathy and disinterest in engaging in decision-making processes. More worrisome is its effect on the quality of governance and the decline of faith in democracy as a system that can deliver to the needs of the people. In Nigeria, the absence of active citizen participation in decision-making processes especially at the local level has enabled the ineffectiveness of local authorities and a culture of impunity while widening the gap between the government and the people at the local government level. For a democratically elected government to deliver to the development needs of the people at the local level and rebuild citizens' trust, there has to be some reinventing of representation in a way that; promotes information sharing, builds trust and enables participation of diverse voices and marginalised groups. Accordingly, we must constantly identify new ways of creating spaces for effective participation and building citizens' agency. This informed the establishment of the People's Assembly (PA) as a deliberative democracy tool that enables citizens at the local level to engage through debates, consensus building and dialogue with elected representatives to collectively influence policies at the local level.



## **What are the well-known ideas to solve this problem, and why are they not enough?**

As part of the democratisation process, civic education, lawmaker-constituents engagement, voting, civic actions and advocacy for policy or political reforms amongst others remain important ideas as means of citizen participation. However, these opportunities to increase citizen participation, have their respective limitations. For instance, voting empowers the people to choose their leaders and leaders emerge based on who had the majority of votes depending on how “majority” is interpreted in different contexts. However, this also creates a sense of loss for those whose candidates failed to secure the elective offices. But while voting enable’s just the voice to choose, it does not guarantee that policies will be a reflection of the people of the people. Similarly, constituents’ engagement with Lawmakers may not result in consensus building as the divisive lines of politics remain prevalent. Such meetings sometimes favour the most popular voices or create clientele relations between legislators and their constituents.

Addressing the challenge of citizen participation and the decline of trust in a democracy like Nigeria, therefore needs a bridge that will coalesce the missing link in the existing ideas and that truly empowers citizens through a deliberative process that connects and amplifies voices. This is particularly necessary with the layers of diversity which are usual points of conflict in Nigeria. One of our hypotheses is that citizens participation in local governance in Nigeria can improve the quality of leadership, improve the management of public resources and enable a culture of accountability.

## **What is the People’s Assembly, and why would it be better?**

People’s Assembly operates as a direct democracy tool aimed at fostering direct public participation in decision-making. The aim is to promote a culture of public deliberation to inform policy formulation at the local government level. In addition, the People’s Assembly initiative seeks to inspire confidence in democracy by promoting information sharing as well as amplifying citizens’ voices and supporting citizens’ consensus on policy issues. The idea is to promote equal participation of citizens in the decision-making process through information sharing, public debates, and consensus building.

The People’s Assembly is hosted in the Local Government Areas which is the tier of the government closest to the people, yet the most obscured and almost absent in the governance conversation. The PA at the local level is driven to propel citizen engagement at the grassroots leveraging existing structures at the local level and amplifying the voices of the people.

## **How would it work? (basic design elements)**

Establishing a People’s Assembly can take different forms. For Yiaga Africa, there was a need to conduct a baseline to identify the Local Government Areas in the selected states to establish the people’s assembly. Nigeria has a federal structure made up of the deferral government, 36 state governments and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) and 774 local government areas across the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory. Learning from Yiaga Africa’s Pilot PA and the subsequent establishment of PAs, a simple guide includes basic steps like:



▶ **Selecting Diverse Representation:** there is a selection of a diverse group of people leveraging existing structures within the local government areas for the first Assembly. The guiding principles include: representing different interests (these include, but not limited to; unions, professional bodies, traditional institutions in the LGA, and religious institutions in the respective communities), representation of marginalised groups (in Nigeria's case; women, youth and persons with disability), representation from the government (both executive and legislature) and representation from any established structure existing to interface with Government.

▶ **Convening the People's Assembly:** this is the technical convening to establish the Assembly. The Guide for the Assembly includes:


- **Introduction:** this includes a personal introduction highlighting individual preferences on what name they want to be called or their preferred title, suffix etc. Then it proceeds to introduce the concept of the People's Assembly as a deliberative democracy tool and setting ground rules. Typical ground rules include; respecting the time allotted for each speaker, respecting others' opinions, debating without the use of insulting, derogatory terms etc. The ground rules have to be agreed on by all present.
- **Room Tour 1:** this allows, everyone in attendance, an equal opportunity to speak sharing their thought on their challenge with democracy, and what democracy means to them
- **Room Tour 2:** this allows everyone present an opportunity to identify one or two major issues they would want to see addressed in their community. These issues listed are

noted/written on a screen/flip chart/board etc for everyone to see.

- **Deliberation:** here different speakers provide more information in support of any of the issues highlighted. Deliberation is considered as a necessary precondition for the legitimacy of democratic political decisions. The idea of this is to also enable the process that leads to consensus.
- **Consensus Building:** Issues of convergence and divergence highlighted. Discussions to build consensus on the policy issue to begin with and to engage the government.
- **Commitments:** this requires a commitment to engage further on the consensus issue and a commitment from the government represented to work with the Assemblies on the respective issues.
- **Identifying leadership teams for subsequent Assemblies:** here the idea is for the People's Assembly to identify a leadership team to manage subsequent convening. This leadership can be rotational to enable more people to have the opportunity to lead. The leadership team is also tasked to identify more voices to participate in subsequent Assemblies.

▶ **Issue-based Expanded Assemblies:** this is a larger meeting with more representation from the community. This enables more conversations on the resolutions from the first technical assembly. This Assembly must have representation from the local authority.

▶ **People's Agenda government meeting:** final resolution from the Assemblies presented to the government as a people's agenda.



The People's Assembly are expected to regularly deliberate on issues, debate, exchange ideas and consider different claims that are designed to secure the public good for their respective communities. Through this conversation, citizens agree about what procedure, action, or policy will best produce the public good, and will be adopted for action by the LGA Chairman.

### **What are the potential benefits? What are the risks?**

The People's Assembly provides an opportunity for regular public deliberation at the local government level which increases citizens participation in the governance process. Holding a regular People's Assembly provides an opportunity for citizens to contribute to and influence decision-making, ensuring that policies at the local government level respond to the real needs of different groups at the community level. It also ensures that no voice is drowned by the voices of the majority and that there is diversity in the representation, especially for historically marginalised voices. It creates a sense of citizens ownership over policy processes and improves the legitimacy of decisions made by the democratically elected official. Ultimately, People's Assembly helps rebuild trust in democracy and inspires active citizen engagement.

While the People's Assembly provides a lot of benefits, it also has a potential risk of political leaders misconstruing its purpose and engaging with it as an opposition. That can weaken the ability of the People's Assembly to achieve measurable results. In addition, the participation of government officials in assembly deliberations can lead to a furtherance of politicians' interests rather than citizens' interest, and the ultimate hijack of the assembly groups by political parties.


### **What is the evidence from practice?**

It provided the platform for both education and participation in policy-related issues that helped direct local government interventions. This enables more interest of the people, evidenced in the willingness to participate by the turnout at assembly deliberations and follow-up with LGA officials on resolutions reached. There have also been resolutions from the People's Assembly adopted by the local government authorities. For instance, one of the resolutions from the People's Assembly in Surulere LGA in Lagos state resulted in the completion of a road construction in one of the communities. In Kosofe LGA, one of the resolutions was a policy on drainage system management in the LGA to deal with a persisting challenge of poor drainage systems posing a health threat to the people. This resolution was adopted by the LGA as a priority issue and subsequently attended to.

One major lessons from the People's Assembly so far is the value of maintaining an open, non-partisan and inclusive communication between the people and government.

### **What are the requirements for success?**

Understanding the issues from a technical point of view is critical to having sound debates and deliberations. When citizens are informed with adequate knowledge of issues, the level of participation in debates and deliberations is elevated, thereby improving the quality of resolutions reached during deliberations. The People's Assembly must be a non-partisan platform where everyone has an equal opportunity to be heard.



In addition, to give legitimacy to resolutions passed, it is important for representatives of the LGA to participate in assembly deliberations. This allows for the co-creation of ideas by citizens and government and the incorporation of resolutions in the policy formulation process.

### **Addressing likely objections**

There are arguments about the capacity of citizens to deliberate on issues they have little or no knowledge about. Since deliberative democracy is about debates and dialogue on how best to secure a public good or achieve a policy reform, it is expected that deliberators should be able to effectively argue their points reasonably such that it is publicly justifiable. The inadequate capacity of deliberators is one of the likely objections to people's assembly. The quality of debates and arguments is critical to proffering sound recommendations on issues to the local government administration for adoption and implementation. One way of bridging this gap is to engage expert facilitators on thematic issues to provide knowledge and information to people's assembly groups before deliberations.

### **What questions (if any) need more research, practice, and evaluation?**

The question of the capacity of deliberators requires the introduction of engaging expert facilitators in people's assembly meetings to improve the quality of recommendations made by the assemblies. The practice will also increase citizens' confidence to participate in the assembly meetings if they know that expert information on issues to be deliberated upon will be provided. Similarly, the engagement of expert facilitators in assembly meetings can aid the adoption and implementation of recommendations by local government authorities. Knowing that deliberations were guided by expert information, local government authorities can fasten the process of adoption and implementation of recommendations in policy formulation.