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To cite this article: Suryamayi Clarence-Smith & Lesley Branagan (24 Jul 2024): Evolving Prefigurative Politics in an Intentional Community: The Auroville Citizens' Assembly Pilot, New Political Science, DOI: [10.1080/07393148.2024.2376425](https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2024.2376425)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2024.2376425>



Published online: 24 Jul 2024.



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Evolving Prefigurative Politics in an Intentional Community: The Auroville Citizens' Assembly Pilot

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we explore how a Citizens' Assembly project in Auroville – the largest intentional community in the world – sought to prefigure new practices in collective decision-making. A Citizens' Assembly model is a democratic innovation that enacts a deliberative mode of political decision-making by everyday citizens. It has been used by diverse bodies, from social movements to nation-state governments around the world. Auroville's 2021 Citizens' Assembly pilot – concerning a water vision for Auroville – is a unique case study that enables us to make a distinctive contribution to the existing academic scholarship concerning Citizens' Assemblies and prefigurative politics on two grounds. Firstly, Auroville is an intentional community shaped by specific spiritual and self-governance values – an uncommon setting for a Citizens' Assembly that supports us to make specific empirical offerings not seen in the literature on Citizens' Assemblies to date. Secondly, given that Auroville's pilot Citizens' Assembly sought to prefigure the community's foundational ideals of "human unity" and "unending education" in its collective decision-making practice, we connect our analysis to the academic scholarship concerning prefigurative politics. In doing so, we uniquely draw together the scholarship concerning Citizens' Assemblies and the literature concerning prefigurative politics to explore whether such democratic innovations have a transformative effect on the political contexts they are embedded in, which we freshly consider with a focus on local scale, and the role that institutionalisation might have in terms of ensuring the reproduction, and thereby lasting impact of such experiments, or conversely their nullification.

KEYWORDS

Citizens' assembly; prefigurative politics; collective decision-making; direct democracy; deliberative democracy; democratic innovation

Introduction: The Challenge of Evolving Self Governance

On a hot day in a green corner of south India in September 2019, thirty members of an international experimental community sit in chairs facing a small stage, having been invited to hear a new idea for the community's self-governance. The ten members of the core organising team – including the two authors of this paper – introduce themselves and present the Citizens' Assembly decision-making model in order to

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gauge the community's interest. One community member then stands up and speaks with passion. "I've always been too shy to speak in community meetings," emphasises Meena, a long-standing member of the 3300-strong Auroville community. "The meetings are always dominated by the same people with the strongest opinions and the best language skills. It's intimidating for me. I feel that the small groups-aspect of this Citizens' Assembly model will help shy people like me to have a voice, and to have our opinions heard." As community members of Auroville and part of the organising team, we authors were also enthused about the model's potential and wanted to move forward with a pilot Assembly. Clarence-Smith's prior PhD research had noted the challenges within the Auroville community's decision-making process. Together, as activist-participant-researchers, we were keen to participate in this experiment, to document and evaluate it, in the hope that the model – and our research – would hold long-term value for the community and could contribute to the wider knowledge concerning Citizens' Assemblies around the world.

In this paper we explore how a Citizens' Assembly project in Auroville – the largest intentional community in the world – sought to prefigure new practices in collective decision-making via the creation of a water vision for Auroville. A Citizens' Assembly model is a democratic innovation that enacts a deliberative mode of political decision-making by everyday citizens. It has been used by diverse bodies, from social movements to nation-state governments around the world. Auroville's 2021 pilot Citizens' Assembly is a unique case study, which enables us to make a distinctive contribution to the existing academic scholarship concerning Citizens' Assemblies and prefigurative politics on two grounds. Firstly, Auroville is an intentional community shaped by specific spiritual and self-governance values – an uncommon setting for a Citizens' Assembly that supports us to make specific insights as a singular empirical offering not seen in the literature on Citizens' Assemblies to date. Secondly, given that Auroville's pilot Citizens' Assembly sought to prefigure the community's foundational ideals concerning self-governance, "human unity" and "unending education," we connect our analysis to the academic scholarship concerning prefigurative politics. In doing so, we uniquely draw together the scholarship concerning Citizens' Assemblies, and the literature concerning the practices of prefigurative politics, to explore two cross-cutting questions: Can such democratic innovations have a transformative effect on the political contexts they are embedded in (which we freshly consider with a focus on local scales)? What role can institutionalisation play in terms of ensuring the reproduction, and thereby lasting impact of such experiments, or conversely their nullification? We also reflect on how citizen participation in community-based political processes can be improved by having these engage with the societal values of the contexts in which they arise.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section outlines the proliferation of Citizens' Assemblies worldwide over the last fifteen years, followed by a consideration of the literature concerning Citizens' Assemblies and prefiguration. This is followed by a context section that introduces the prefigurative polity that is Auroville, and its unique governance processes. The second section presents an outline of our methodology. Next, the empirical section chronicles the experience of Auroville's pilot Citizens' Assembly along with our ethnographic insights. We discuss these in the fourth section, in relation to the literature on prefigurative politics. In the conclusion,

we consider the relevance of local democratic innovations such as the Auroville's pilot Assembly for fostering democratic values, within a global context in which these are increasingly threatened or suppressed.

On Citizens' Assemblies

A Citizens' Assembly is a deliberative decision-making process in which a randomly selected group of residents of a city or country¹ come together to learn and deliberate about a given issue from a variety of perspectives, and arrive at key recommendations. There has been a flourishing of Citizens' Assembly processes in the last fifteen years, particularly in the Global North, in countries with long-standing democratic traditions. Regional Citizens' Assemblies were held on electoral reform in Canada in 2004 (British Columbia) and 2006 (Ontario), while a national Citizens' Assembly was held in 2006 in the Netherlands. Ireland held national Citizens' Assemblies on its constitution in 2012 and 2016, as did France and the United Kingdom in 2019-2020 on the topic of climate change. More recently, smaller-scale pilots have been held in the Global South on issues of resource scarcity – such as in Lebanon on energy justice. A nation-wide Citizens' Assembly to redraft the (dictatorship-era) Chilean constitution was initiated in 2021, following a period of popular upheaval.

Scholars of Citizens' Assemblies recognize these as examples of deliberative democracy,² in which citizen participation in political decision-making, typically in representative democracies, is secured through deliberative processes, defined as such by criteria including equitable participation, civil discussion between people who disagree, and the absence of coercion or censorship.³ Usually, a government will call for a Citizens' Assembly on a topic for which the inputs of citizens are seen as particularly important. This can include topics where a yes/no decision is required – such as, for example, on the question of whether to legalise abortion in Ireland⁴ – or policy topics such as energy or electoral reform that require comprehensive recommendations, as was the case for the Auroville's pilot Citizens' Assembly on a water vision for the township. Governments will define beforehand whether the outcomes will be recognized as legally binding, or simply as recommendations for the government to take into consideration. That said, governments have frequently failed to adopt the

¹While Citizens' Assemblies are generally held at a city or country scale, there is currently a Citizens' Assembly being held at the global scale: the ongoing Global Citizens' Assembly, which addresses climate change.

²Lyn Carson, "Creating Democratic Surplus through Citizens' Assemblies," *Journal of Deliberative Democracy* 4, no. 1 (2007), <https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.64>; Michael Pal, "The Promise and Limits of Citizens' Assemblies: Deliberation, Institutions and the Law of Democracy," *Queens Law Journal* 38, no. 1 (2012), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2176808>.

³P. Levine, "Deliberative Democracy," 2022, <https://sites.tufts.edu/civicstudies/2022/01/26/deliberative-democracy/>.

⁴R. McKee, "The Citizens Assembly behind the Irish Abortion Referendum," 2018, <https://involve.org.uk/resources/blog/opinion/citizens-assembly-behind-irish-abortion-referendum>.

recommendations of Citizens' Assemblies, as has been the case in France, Iceland, Australia, and Belgium.⁵

The Citizens' Assembly we examine is a rather unique example of this deliberative model being used in the context of a direct democracy, one where individuals do not transfer decision-making power to elected representatives, described by David Graeber as "democracy without the government."⁶ The assembly held in Auroville, on the topic of defining a water vision for the community, was led by a group of community activists, inspired not only by the Citizens' Assembly model's potential to improve collective decision-making processes in their community, but also the opportunity it would afford to prefigure the community's key ideals of "human unity" and "unending education" within such processes. In light of this overlap, we examine the literature on both Citizens' Assemblies and prefigurative politics towards analysing this case-study and its relevance.

Citizens' Assemblies & Prefigurative Politics: Crosscutting Considerations in the Literature

Deliberative democracy scholarship has already been endowed with a prefigurative *raison d'être* – "not just to posit the shape of ideal deliberation, but also to critique existing institutions and develop new ones."⁷ In this article we take the next heuristic step and examine this particular Citizens' Assembly project through the theoretical framework of prefiguration, heretofore used in the scholarship of direct democracy, by, for example, Graeber⁸ and Maeckelbergh.⁹

"Prefiguration" refers to the intentional enactment of modes of organisation, social relations, attitudes and culture that a collective envisions for its future, through "experimental and experiential" means.¹⁰ Scholars have recently spotlighted intentional communities – in which a group of people choose to live together "to enhance their shared values"¹¹ – as sites of prefigurative practice, given that they experiment with

⁵Lyn Carson et al., *The Australian Citizens' Parliament and the Future of Deliberative Democracy*, *The Australian Citizens' Parliament and the Future of Deliberative Democracy* (Philadelphia, PA: Penn State University Press, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271062464>; Vincent Jacquet et al., "The Macro Political Uptake of the G1000 in Belgium," in *Constitutional Deliberative Democracy in Europe*. Edited by Min Reuchamps and Jane Suiter (Colchester, UK: ECPR Press, 2016).

⁶David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Edinburgh, UK: AK Press, 2009), 320.

⁷Pal, "The Promise and Limits of Citizens' Assemblies," 263.

⁸Graeber, *Direct Action*; David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (New York, NY; London, UK: Spiegel & Grau (Random House); Allen Lane (Penguin UK), 2013), <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/53174/>.

⁹M. Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many* (London, UK: Pluto Press, 2009); Marianne Maeckelbergh, "Doing Is Believing: Prefiguration as Strategic Practice in the Alterglobalization Movement," *Social Movement Studies* 10, no. 1 (2011): 1–20, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2011.545223>.

¹⁰Mathijs van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools: Prefiguration and Radical Politics in the Twenty-First Century," *Rethinking Marxism* 27, no. 2 (2015): 177–94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2015.1007791>.

¹¹Lyman Tower Sargent, "Introduction," in *Utopianism: A Very Short Introduction*, ed. Lyman Tower Sargent (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2010), 9, <https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780199573400.003.0001>.

reinventing society inspired by a wide range of ideals, from alternative economy and education to ecological and social sustainability.¹² The literature on intentional communities generally focuses on documenting the alternative practices with which they engage,¹³ but why and how these are adopted and sustained, and the meanings their members ascribe to this process, remains largely under-explored. Recent efforts to bring a prefigurative lens to these practices has helped to bridge this gap.¹⁴

Although prefigurative scholars such as Monticelli¹⁵ are beginning to map a broad spectrum of prefigurative practices, the historical and enduring focus of research has been on direct and participatory decision-making processes in leftist social movements, such as that by Boggs¹⁶, Graeber¹⁷, Maeckelbergh,¹⁸ and Yates.¹⁹ Intentional communities today largely embrace flexible and non-hierarchical forms of political organisation, as Firth notes.²⁰ Sargisson²¹ and Sargisson & Sargent²² emphasise that anarchic self-governance allows for the experimentation and experience that is key to a prefigurative mode of decision-making.

In this article, we will explore how a Citizens' Assembly project in Auroville – the largest intentional community in the world – sought to engage in a collective decision-making process that prefigured the community's foundational ideals of human unity and unending education.²³ Our primary aim is to make a distinctive, empirical

¹²Suryamayi Clarence-Smith, "Auroville: An Experiment in Spiritually Prefigurative Utopian Practice," in *Transgressive Utopianism: Essays in Honour of Lucy Sargisson*, ed. Lyman Tower Sargent and Raffaella Baccolini (Lausanne, Switzerland: Peter Lang (Ralahine Utopian Studies), 2021); Suryamayi Clarence-Smith, "Towards a Spiritualised Society: Auroville, An Experiment in Prefigurative Utopianism" (PhD, University of Sussex, 2019); Carine Farias, "That's What Friends Are For: Hospitality and Affective Bonds Fostering Collective Empowerment in an Intentional Community," *Organization Studies* 38, no. 5 (2017): 577–95, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840616670437>; Lara Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century," *Communication, Capitalism & Critique. Open Access Journal for a Global Sustainable Information Society* 16, no. 2 (2018): 501–17, <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v16i2.1032>.

¹³Susan Love Brown, *Intentional Community: An Anthropological Perspective* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2001); D. Pitzer, ed., *America's Communal Utopias* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), <https://uncpress.org/book/9780807846094/americas-communal-utopias/>; Lucy Sargisson and Lyman Tower Sargent, *Living in Utopia: New Zealand's Intentional Communities* (London, UK: Routledge, 2004), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315250342>.

¹⁴Clarence-Smith, "Towards a Spiritualised Society Utopianism."

¹⁵Lara Monticelli, "On the Necessity of Prefigurative Politics," *Thesis Eleven* 167, no. 1 (2021): 99–118, <https://doi.org/10.1177/07255136211056992>.

¹⁶Karl Boggs, "Marxism, Prefigurative Communism and the Problem of Workers' Control," *Radical America* 6 (1977): 99–122.

¹⁷Graeber, *Direct Action*; Graeber, *The Democracy Project*.

¹⁸Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many*; Maeckelbergh, "Doing Is Believing."

¹⁹Luke Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration: Alternatives, Micropolitics and Goals in Social Movements," *Social Movement Studies* 14, no. 1 (2015): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2013.870883>.

²⁰Rhiannon Firth, "Utopian and Intentional Communities," in *Palgrave Handbook of Anarchism*, ed. Matthew Adams and Carl Levy (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 491–510.

²¹Lucy Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000).

²²Sargisson and Sargent, *Living in Utopia*.

²³The Mother, "Auroville Charter" (Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1968).

contribution to the broader academic literature on Citizens' Assemblies and prefigurative politics, one that uniquely draws these two literatures together to explore new potentials. Citizens' Assemblies have not been featured in the literature on prefiguration. This is perhaps due to the historical conflation of prefigurative politics with participatory, direct democratic practices mentioned above. Or, to the relationship between Citizens' Assemblies and mainstream democratic governments, which have used the model as a tool for citizen engagement and consultation, while the *raison d'être* of prefigurative politics is understood to be the articulation of a radical (left) alternative to representative democracy, eschewing any form of association with the state.²⁴

Scholars of the community such as Clarence-Smith and Monticelli²⁵ have already highlighted that Auroville is a prime example of an enduring enactment of prefigurative political practice. This is particularly significant given the observation made by Hardt and Negri,²⁶ based on extensive empirical research, that the participatory modes of decision-making that prefigurative politics employ harbour inherent challenges related to scale, efficiency, equitability, and sustainability. Prefigurative politics have also been criticised for their ephemeral nature and an associated lack of political relevance,²⁷ which scholars such as Rowe and Carroll²⁸ and van de Sande²⁹ link to an ideological indisposition to engage with existing institutions. Political relevance is a concern for Citizens' Assemblies as well, given that these largely remain experiments in governance without the institutional recognition and legal mechanisms required to uphold their outcomes, often resulting in governments disregarding their recommendations.³⁰ Citizens' Assembly scholar Courant asks whether these (and other) ever-growing but "largely ad hoc and ephemeral" cases of deliberative democracy need institutionalisation as "a necessary condition for democratic innovations to meet great expectations?"³¹

Because prefigurative politics seek to articulate an alternative to mainstream power, van de Sande has noted that "emancipation within, acceptance by, or incorporation into current power structures"³² is seen as invalidating their prefigurative nature. Yet in recent years, the purported incompatibility between prefigurative practice and

²⁴van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools."

²⁵Suryamayi Clarence-Smith and Lara Monticelli, "Flexible Institutionalisation in Auroville: A Prefigurative Alternative to Development," *Sustainability Science* 17, no. 4 (2022): 1171–82, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11625-022-01096-0>.

²⁶Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Assembly*, Heretical Thought (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁷Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (New York, NY: Verso Books, 2013).

²⁸James K. Rowe and Myles Carroll, "What the Left Can Learn From Occupy Wall Street," *Studies in Political Economy* 96, no. 1 (September 2015): 145–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19187033.2015.11674941>.

²⁹van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools."

³⁰Carson et al., *The Australian Citizens' Parliament and the Future of Deliberative Democracy*; Jacquet et al., "The Macro Political Uptake of the G1000 in Belgium."

³¹Dimitri Courant, "Deliberative Democracy, Legitimacy, and Institutionalisation," *Université de Lausanne Les Cahiers de l'IEPHI IEPHI Working Paper Series*, 2018, 3.

³²van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools," 178.

institutionalisation or statehood has been challenged by scholars exploring the prefigurative potential of the state³³ and the institutional potential of prefiguration.³⁴ Clarence-Smith and Monticelli³⁵ have demonstrated that the Auroville community succeeded in sustaining and developing itself (for over fifty years) through a “flexible” form of institutionalisation that retained a prefigurative character, while awarded the status of an autonomous Foundation by the Indian government. This example substantiates Cooper’s argument that the state and other institutions need to be engaged as “necessary sites of transformative action,”³⁶ and that this can give rise to “differently scaled, bounded forms of institutionalised diversity” that include “micro, guerrilla and regional states.”³⁷ Similarly, Marxist scholar Olin Wright has suggested that the state may have a role to play in enabling “real utopias” – alternatives to capitalism based on “democracy, equality and solidarity”³⁸ – documenting case-studies such as the development of participatory budgeting processes in the city of Porto Alegre, Brazil.³⁹

In this article, we wish to contribute to the on-going academic debate around the political relevance and potential of prefigurative politics and democratic innovations – of which Citizens’ Assemblies are a primary, contemporary example – by examining a case-study in what Cooper might refer to as a “micro state”⁴⁰ or Wright as a “real utopia.”⁴¹ The Auroville Citizens’ Assembly pilot is a prefigurative enactment towards improving the community’s decision-making culture, and allows us to consider whether prefigurative political practice can positively impact, and democratic innovations be successfully integrated, in the political practice and organisation of the contexts in which these are embedded, when this is attempted at local scales.

Context: Auroville, A Self-Organised, Spiritually Prefigurative Community

Auroville was founded in Tamil Nadu, South India, in 1968, by a guru known as The Mother (Mirra Alfassa), as a spiritual community that would be self-organised, “a divine anarchy.”⁴² The project was inspired by the Integral Yoga philosophy and practice of

³³Davina Cooper, “Prefiguring the State,” *Antipode* 49, no. 2 (2017): 335–56, <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12277>.

³⁴Clarence-Smith and Monticelli, “Flexible Institutionalisation in Auroville.”

³⁵Clarence-Smith and Monticelli.

³⁶Davina Cooper, “Towards an Adventurous Institutional Politics: The Prefigurative “as If” and the Reposing of What’s Real,” *The Sociological Review* 68, no. 5 (2020): 893–916, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038026120915148>.

³⁷Cooper, “Prefiguring the State,” 350.

³⁸Erik Olin Wright, “The Continuing Relevance of the Marxist Tradition for Transcending Capitalism,” *Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 16, no. 2 (2018): 490–500, <https://doi.org/10.31269/triplec.v16i2.968>.

³⁹Erik Olin Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias* (London, UK: Verso, 2010).

⁴⁰Cooper, “Prefiguring the State,” 350.

⁴¹Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*.

⁴²The Mother, *Collected Works of The Mother*, vol. 13, Words of the Mother - 1 (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2003), 219.

her spiritual collaborator, Sri Aurobindo, a Nobel Prize-nominated Indian philosopher, spiritual reformist, freedom fighter, poet and author who promoted a spiritual transformation of human nature and society. Early community members included disciples from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in the nearby city of Pondicherry, European and American spiritual seekers who had encounters with The Mother, and people from the neighboring villages.

Today Auroville is the largest, most diverse, and one of the most long-standing intentional communities in the world, with approximately 3300 members of over sixty nationalities, half of whom are Indian citizens.⁴³ Understood by its members to be a pioneering experiment in human society – and endorsed as such by UNESCO and the Government of India⁴⁴ – Auroville has attempted to create alternative models of collective organisation and practices that seek to forge consciousness, human unity, and progress, as per its Charter.⁴⁵ This includes common-account cooperatives that encourage conscious consumption, to communal decision-making forums that integrate spiritual practices such as meditation, to social and educational enterprises that foster holistic self-development and ecologically conscious living. Property is collectively owned in the community, there is no specific leader, and there is no overarching “ownership” of the project, which is registered since 1988 as an autonomous Foundation under the auspices of India’s Ministry of Education.

The Auroville Charter and other foundational texts (such as “To Be a True Aurovilian”) emphasise the goal of attaining “human unity,”⁴⁶ by living “in peace and progressive harmony” “above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities.”⁴⁷ This ideal of “unity in diversity” is part of the vision of Integral Yoga, which is broadly (yet loosely) subscribed to by the majority of Aurovilians. The concept is not simply understood as multiculturalism or political pluralism, but is shaped by metaphysical spiritual values, that is, a connection with what is perceived in oneself and others as the Divine Consciousness.⁴⁸ These elements in turn shape approaches to governance in Auroville, in that there is seen to be a “rule of the Divine” that inspires unity while simultaneously upholding diversity, one that should supplant governance exercised by the state.⁴⁹ In line with this ideal, there is constant experimentation and reformulation of governance practices

⁴³Auroville, “Auroville Census December 2022 – Auroville Population” (Auroville, 2022), <https://auroville.org/page/census-dec-2023-auroville-population-539>.

⁴⁴Auroville, “Auroville, Statements of Support – UNESCO” (UNESCO, 2020), <https://auroville.org/page/statements-of-support-unesco#>; Auroville, ‘Auroville, Statements of Support from Government of India’, 2020, <https://auroville.org/page/statements-of-support-from-government-of-india-609#>.

⁴⁵see Mother, “Auroville Charter.”

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷K. Joshi, “Kireet Joshi’s Talk on Internal Organisation of Auroville, 25th August, 1999” (Auroville, India, 1999).

⁴⁸see Van der Heyden, “Towards Human Unity: Realising Conscious Communication as Development. Three Case Studies in Auroville, South India” (MA Thesis, The American University of Paris, 2020); J. Meier, “Being Aurovilian: Constructions of Self, Spirituality and India in an International Community,” *J@rgonia* 4, no. 10 (2006): 1–23.

⁴⁹Joshi, “Kireet Joshi’s Talk on Internal Organisation of Auroville, 25th August, 1999.”

(and other aspects of community life) in Auroville that aspire to be spiritually prefigurative.⁵⁰ The community has secured autonomous arrangements for its own governance, enshrined in an Act of Parliament,⁵¹ which defines Auroville's "Residents' Assembly" as responsible for all day-to-day management, administration, and decision-making. The Residents' Assembly (RA) is composed of all adult members of the community, and may undertake its duties in whichever way it sees fit (The Residents' Assembly body should not be confused with the recently introduced Citizens' Assembly initiative). Since its early years, the community has exercised a communal, consensus-based practice of political decision-making, while also gradually forming and selecting a number of administrative "Working Groups" to take up management or coordination of various aspects of community life, such as funds and assets management, or town planning. These Working Groups remain accountable to the Residents' Assembly as per their mandates.

Similar self-governance models of direct and participatory decision-making have been used to organise thousands of participants in prefigurative social movements such as Occupy Wall Street and the Global Justice Movement.⁵² However, issues of equitable participation raised by scholars of these movements are reproduced in the Auroville context. There has been widespread community dissatisfaction with the General Meetings of the Residents' Assembly, and a lack of engagement of the majority of the population as a result. The number of people who typically attended Auroville's General Meetings prior to the Citizens' Assembly pilot were relatively small – about 200 people, little more than ten percent of the adult Aurovilian population. However, crisis topics have always been better attended, and an acute crisis in governance since December 2021 has consistently drawn record participation rates in Residents' Assembly decisions, with more than 1000 residents voting on key decisions. The issues generally raised with the community's decision-making processes are common to direct and participatory democratic models and experiences worldwide.⁵³ Specific points of dissatisfaction with Auroville decision-making forums include the high investment in time, lack of confidence in an actionable outcome, and questions about the wisdom of adopting a voting model (which some claimed had disempowered the forum), instead of a consensus approach. Participation in deliberation is a challenge due to the tacit requirement of public speaking, meetings held in English, and a lack of constructive communication skills, which sometimes contributes to heated and polarised dynamics. The diversity of the community adds a further layer of complexity in this regard, given that the sense of entitlement to speak is influenced by race and nationality, gender and age, class and caste, and longevity in the community, which inextricably and sometimes invisibly shapes deliberative processes.

⁵⁰Clarence-Smith, "Towards a Spiritualised Society: Auroville, an Experiment in Prefigurative Utopianism."

⁵¹Government of India, "Auroville Foundation Act, 1988" (1988), <https://www.indiacode.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/1776/1/198854.pdf>.

⁵²Graeber, *The Democracy Project*.

⁵³Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*.

Introducing the Citizens' Assembly Model to Evolve Auroville as a Polity

In 2019, a few Auroville residents learned about the deliberative decision-making model of Citizens' Assemblies that had been trialled in different parts of the world, and strongly felt that this approach held much potential for Auroville. They felt that random selection could be effective in engaging more community members than current practices and could thereby provide an opportunity to foster "human unity" by facilitating new relational opportunities in this critical space of collective decision-making, heretofore dominated by regular participants. Furthermore, its educational component was aligned with the community's key ideal of "unending education." The enthused group conducted research on Citizens' Assemblies in other parts of the world, and consulted with the Sortition Foundation, which has supported the establishment of many Citizens' Assemblies globally. They began consulting other residents in small, informal interactions to assess whether there was shared enthusiasm in the community for piloting this decision-making process in Auroville. Encouraging responses eventually built up to community-wide meetings, in which overwhelming support was expressed for running a Citizens' Assembly pilot as an "action research" project to determine the model's suitability for Auroville, and concrete suggestions offered (such as including teenagers aged sixteen and above, and using "pure" rather than stratified random selection). A couple more community members chose to join the eleven person self-appointed "Citizens' Assembly Exploration Team," sub-groups were created to manage specific aspects of the pilot Assembly, such as documentation, communication with the community, fundraising and budgeting, and research and evaluation; the authors of this paper were part of this latter sub-group.

To begin with, the topic was chosen through a community survey: "Developing a water vision for Auroville," an effort to synthesise the diverging views and initiatives amongst community experts on how to address the increasingly severe water crisis in the region emerged as a top priority. A random selection of 140 participants was then undertaken from the community's master list of community members, with the aim of ultimately confirming twenty to forty participants. While the concept of stratified selection – an approach that aims to ensure the selection of quotas of people according to various parameters, for example nationality, age, gender – had been presented in a community-wide meeting as a means to ensure a diverse and representative group, the response was for the selection process to be completely random. While the organising team had hoped for feedback on how to define "diversity" and adequate "representation" in the demographically complex context of Auroville, residents expressed that it would be inappropriate to select people according to any pre-determined criteria. One Tamil man in particular vehemently decried the suggestion that nationality be used as a basis for selection. While unexpected in light of a global trend of using quotas to ensure inclusion of under-represented groups, the response from the Auroville community does echo its own fundamental understandings of what it means to be a "true Aurovilian," specifically "...to know who one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances..."⁵⁴ It was thereby

⁵⁴The Mother, "To Be a True Aurovilian" (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970).

decided not to use stratified, but entirely random selection. While the potential diversity of participants was therefore arbitrary, efforts were made to remove existing barriers to (voluntary) participation for those selected, such as providing simultaneous translation into their native languages, offering childcare, and focusing on small group discussions where everybody could share their views. In the end, thirty-four people agreed to participate, forming a more diverse group in terms of age, language, culture, and experience in Auroville than generally observed in Auroville's decision-making processes. We did not capture data on class and caste, due to the sensitivity of the topic in the local region, however, our long experience in the community enables us to note a great amount of class and caste diversity in the final composition of the group.

The pilot Assembly took place over eight sessions during October 2020 - March 2021: an introduction and skill-building exercises to understand and recognise bias, and develop deep listening (Session 1); evidence sessions with presentations by various "water experts" (Sessions 2-6); synthesising a water vision for Auroville (Session 7); and suggestions for its implementation (Session 8). Following Covid restrictions, face-to-face presentations by water experts were generally replaced with videos, with both Tamil and English language subtitles and voice-over. Three optional interactive sessions were also held: a panel discussion; and two informal sessions with experts.

The pilot's design aimed to prefigure the ideal of "human unity" through such processes as random selection, small group work, and relationship-building activities. The process also fostered "unending education" through the inclusion of an educational component concerning water. In addition to providing participants with in-depth and diverse perspectives on the issue at hand (a critical yet lacking dimension in the community's collective decision-making processes), the Citizens' Assembly process encouraged participants to learn critical thinking, active listening, and recognition of personal biases and biased information. It was further envisaged that the skills and capacity-building within a small group could contribute towards improving dysfunctional and divisive dynamics in the community's collective decision-making culture, while also building a more conscious and mature collective overall, one of Auroville's overarching goals.

Methodology: Community-Based Research Meets Academic Inquiry

In this article, we seek to analyse Auroville's pilot Citizens' Assembly with a prefigurative lens, and consider the wider relevance of this experiment in terms of the prefigurative character that decision-making processes can take when inspired by local societal ideals. The two authors were action researchers of the pilot Auroville Citizens' Assembly process, acting as members of the core organising team, helping to facilitate and evaluate the process and its outcomes. As scholars of direct democracies have noted, such an activist positionality is typical of researchers who

analyse prefigurative politics, enabling deep insight into this participant-centric practice.⁵⁵

Our action research builds upon our long experience in the community: Dr. Clarence-Smith grew up in Auroville and conducted her PhD research there; Dr. Branagan first visited Auroville twenty-four years ago and has lived in the community for the past five years, during which time she has undertaken ethnographic research in other parts of Tamil Nadu. While deeply involved in Auroville, we have both visited intentional communities in other parts of the world, and draw on this experience in order to position our analysis of Auroville's first Citizens' Assembly within a broader context.

Our primary methods were twofold: for the purposes of the community documentation and learning, we designed and carried out action research in the form of an evaluation of the pilot to assess the model's potential for future uptake by the community. For this academic paper, we supplemented and fleshed out the findings of the evaluation report with ethnographic research methods: participant-observation of the eight sessions, participation in the core organising team's weekly meetings over the course of a full year, thirty interviews (captured for a thirty-eight minute documentary film), and multiple formal and informal interactions with participants, experts, community representatives and other community members before, during and after the process.

The research undertaken for the initial evaluation report was primarily questionnaire-based, supplemented with some focus group discussions. Our key research question for the evaluation was "To what extent can the Citizens' Assembly model support capacity-building and participation in collective decision-making processes in Auroville, towards realising its ideals of human unity and unending education within these?" Our goal was to evaluate whether, how, and to what extent key features of the Citizens' Assembly model are facilitative of and beneficial for constructive collective decision-making in Auroville, and could be usefully applied in future in our community processes. In light of the contextual challenges in Auroville's collective decision-making, we evaluated the following key aspects of this particular process: participation; capacity-building; educational value; process; outcomes. We were keen to understand various barriers to participation and wanted to assess the impact of capacity-building and education for collective decision-making. We sought to ascertain whether the process and outcome were perceived as valuable, given that this has been a key concern in Auroville's collective decision-making processes for a number of years.

To assess the above, we designed questionnaires with both quantitative and qualitative questions which were completed by participants before, during, and after the pilot. These questionnaires were adapted to various groups of respondents: community members who were randomly selected but who did not participate, the presenters, members of the Citizens' Assembly organising team, and of the community at large. In addition, focus group sessions were held with members of Auroville's administrative

⁵⁵Graeber, *Direct Action*; Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many*.

groups, and within the Citizens' Assembly organising team. These findings were synthesised into a comprehensive report for community purposes.⁵⁶ For this academic paper, we draw together the formal evaluation, our ethnographic findings, and the broader academic literature on Citizens' Assemblies and prefigurative politics, in order to analyse Auroville's pilot Citizens' Assembly's wider relevance and contribution to scholarship and practice beyond the Auroville context.

Our positionality as action researchers who come from within the community being studied gives rise to certain questions related to bias and oversight. Yet, scholars of prefigurative politics have demonstrated that their "insider" positionality has enabled deep insights into the practices studied, given the deeply engaged and participatory nature of this practice,⁵⁷ something Clarence-Smith⁵⁸ has also highlighted in her previous autoethnographic research on Auroville. In order to both leverage the benefits of our insider positionality and address the likelihood that our membership of the community under study may have prevented us from seeing or critically evaluating our action research project, we opted for a two-fold methodological approach aimed to mitigate this possibility to some degree.

The anonymous, written questionnaires for participants aimed to produce data that was not influenced by our own presence, our own (potentially biased) observations, or our own hopes that the assembly model would prove to be effective. This remains the core data set for this paper. We were careful to juxtapose and (re)consider our ethnographic methods in light of the participant evaluation obtained through the written responses. In the focus groups with participants, we adhered to a script of questions and focussed on listening (rather than contributing to the discussion itself), in an effort not to influence the discussion and to try and temper (as much as possible) the possibility that our role as community-based action researchers might influence participants' responses. The focus groups with organisers were aimed at producing a team-based analysis of our experience that incorporated other perspectives than our own. In short, we aimed to be as self-reflexive as possible throughout the research process, balancing different methods that would both temper our positionality as community-based action researchers, and as white western educated women operating in a multicultural context replete with cross-cutting class, caste, gender and other inequalities, while drawing from the rich possibilities this positionality offered us for in-depth analysis.

"This Could Be the Answer to Our Structural Governance Problems": The Auroville Citizens' Assembly Pilot

As participants parked their two-wheelers and walked across a dusty patch to a small circular building, members of the organising team welcomed them at the doors of

⁵⁶A. Aggarwal, L. Branagan, and S. Clarence-Smith, 'Auroville Citizens' Assembly Pilot: Exploring the Potential of Randomly Selected Community Members in Collective Decision-Making' (Auroville, India, 2021).

⁵⁷Graeber, *Direct Action*; Maeckelbergh, *The Will of the Many*.

⁵⁸Clarence-Smith, "Towards a Spiritualised Society: Auroville, an Experiment in Prefigurative Utopianism."

the meeting room and helped them to settle into their chairs for the first session of Auroville's pilot Citizens' Assembly. The diverse mix of participants was apparent: from those with much experience in community meetings and collaborative practices, to those who had never participated in any collective meetings and who appeared tentative. There was a palpable sense of curiosity in the air, as the pilot began. Helen, a key member of the organising team began her introduction to this Citizens' Assembly that sought to create a Water Vision for Auroville, while Harshini, the English-to-Tamil translator, also began her work.

In the weeks prior to the first session, each of the organisers met randomly-selected participants to identify potential barriers to participation in community decision-making processes. Indeed, most of the participants had not been active in these in the past. Many felt that these were not safe spaces in which to interact, or they lacked trust in these processes. Many felt that this particular Assembly process would consume too much time - a concern that has already been raised more widely for direct and participatory modes of decision-making.⁵⁹ In these conversations, we tried to allay their concerns and reassure each of them that they would not be expected to do any public speaking, language translators would be present, lunch and childcare would be provided.

This participant-centric invitation approach helped the Assembly to arrive at a participant group that was more diverse (in terms of age groups, languages, cultures, longevity in Auroville, experience of participation in community processes, priorities and viewpoints) than what we had observed in the collective processes in Auroville in recent years. Marie, an expert on water management and mother to a young child, said she would never have been able to participate were it not for the childcare provided on-site. Shankar, who had graduated from one of Auroville's high schools, had never participated in a community process before. Shaun, an Auroville pioneer who regularly hosted community social gatherings but had not come to a community meeting in years, decided to give it a try. And there was Annamalai, an eighty years old Tamil woman who was delighted to have an opportunity to leave her house and gather with community members. Overall, we observed that this diversity was closer to enacting the community's key ideal of "human unity in diversity" than was common in regular community meetings, which tended to be dominated by the habitual (and most confident) speakers.

While a degree of diversity of participants was achieved, we noticed throughout the process that the cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as personal shyness, posed some challenges in ensuring all participants were able to comfortably follow and engage with the process. Some (primarily non-native English speakers) dropped out later, telling us that they were busy with work, or going through personal and family hardship. In order to address participants' key concerns about the inclusivity of formats of exchange, we had designed a supportive, facilitated process largely based on small group discussions, so that everybody could share their views. We also created opportunities for participants to connect with one another at a personal level,

⁵⁹Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*.

through playful group activities, and reflective sharing in pairs, to foster trust and camaraderie.

During the first day different kinds of activities were introduced which aimed to encourage equal participation, particularly for those people who were usually too shy to speak in community meetings. The group went through exercises that addressed bias and listening skills – a component of capacity building that fed into an overarching goal of prefiguring human unity. Bias is typically addressed in Citizens' Assembly processes, and was felt to be all the more important in the Auroville context, given that it is a small community with long personal and interpersonal histories that both foster and hinder a sense of human unity. One participant responded in the survey: "It spotlights in a very neutral/safe way our tendencies of how we react when faced with so many different opinions, fears, concerns, lacking in communication skills when meeting to come up with solutions to a problem." Overall, participants expressed a raised awareness of the dynamic of an exchange of deep listening – the quality, substance, and what was heard. Importantly, participants noted how this capacity-building, coupled with the small group discussion format, enabled them to consider other people's points of view and grow in their understanding of others, and how this enabled them to connect closely with Auroville's key values.

A further element of capacity building as prefigurative action to advance the community's evolution was the educational component of the Assembly. The community's key ideal of "unending education" is understood as continual striving for individual and collective progress in all aspects of life.⁶⁰ This key ideal can be identified as critical to deliberative processes as they span a wide variety of sometimes complex topics, which participants should ideally understand in order to effectively engage in decision-making on the same. The topic of the Citizens' Assembly – water – is perhaps amongst the most challenging, given the complexity of the water situation in Auroville, with multiple stakeholders, approaches, and levels of governance.

Almost all the water used in Auroville and surrounding villages is sourced from the ground. Since its inception, Auroville has implemented rainwater harvesting and natural wastewater treatment systems, constructed check dams and undertaken other initiatives that contribute to groundwater recharge and water security. Despite these efforts, the water table is lowering due to water overextraction from thousands of borewells in the region, as result of increasing urbanization, population growth and irrigation-intensive agriculture. The wide-spread use of pesticides and fertilizers negatively impacts the quality of the groundwater, and there is increasing saline intrusion from the Indian Ocean as aquifer levels drop in this coastal area. Although there is considerable expertise and strong collective will amongst Auroville's water stakeholders to move towards water security in Auroville and the region, the lack of properly collected data and coordinated initiatives has hampered efforts to find comprehensive, sustainable solutions.

Over six sessions, the participants heard from thirty different water experts, including a geomatics expert, a water conservationist, a wastewater expert, an urban planner,

⁶⁰Suryamayi Clarence-Smith, "Auroville, a Site of Unending Education," *Auroville Today*, no. 360 (July 2019).

a forester, a farmer, a botanist, and more. Short informational videos were screened, in which community experts gave their views on a specific aspect of a water vision for Auroville. In the same session, participants reflected, harvested, discussed, and prioritised these elements in small groups. At the end of this series of educational sessions, the entire group worked to arrive at a final synthesis.

As the Assembly moved into the final two sessions, we observed that a significant challenge was the synthesis of content into the final output – a Water Vision. Some core team members were concerned that summarising diverse thoughts into a digestible vision meant that some of the richness of the process was lost. One core team member stated, “I am not convinced that the process of final prioritisation accurately reflected what the participants think. There were too many lacunae and missing steps...” and another commented that she was “uncomfortable” with the use of a rating system to arrive at the final outcome, and that “more time, creativity and deliberation” could have been fostered at the synthesis stage.

While the original goal of the Citizens’ Assembly pilot was to define a water vision for Auroville, during the synthesis process, it became clear to both participants and organisers that harvesting practical recommendations for its implementation was critical for delivering an outcome that could be impactful. Therefore, the participants also devised recommendations for implementation. Many of Auroville’s water experts were positively surprised by the extensive scope of these (both the vision and the suggestions for implementation), considering that the participants were not “water experts.” They appreciated that participants had been exposed to a wide range of perspectives (thirty “water player” interviews), which helped shape their understanding of the topic.

While participants were overwhelmingly positive about the recommendations for implementation and hopeful about their potential to create positive change in Auroville, in the final evaluation, almost three quarters of them expressed concern about taking the implementation process forward. The water experts also expressed this concern, suggesting there was a lack of concreteness to the vision and its implementation, even though they appreciated the water vision outcome. Similar feedback concerning implementation was received from the community-at-large, in a final evaluation (via a survey). “Would be helpful to have a clearer sense of these [outcomes], also clarity on what the next steps forward will be in terms of implementation,” wrote one Aurovilian. “The outcomes seem very theoretical right now ... It feels disappointing in terms of practicality,” shared another. Feedback often pointed more generally towards the need to address the wider difficulties of implementation of collective decision-making processes in Auroville, with one member expressing “There is a need to show some good ‘real’ outcomes ... for the community to develop trust and legitimacy in this approach to decision-making,” and another suggesting that implementation bodies could “become more integrated into the Assembly process.” In light of these concerns, a grassroots implementation team was formed from within the Assembly, consisting of participants, water experts, and organisers, to ensure that its water vision would be upheld. As a first step, it was proposed that a new public service, “Water Link,” be formed to help support and advise water-centric projects in Auroville, as well as collect

and share data on Auroville's water table. Two participants committed to run this service, and funding was secured from Auroville's municipal budget.

A key objective of the final evaluation was to obtain feedback from various stakeholders (participants, Auroville's broader community, and governance groups) regarding the Assembly's potential for transforming collective decision-making culture in Auroville. The stakeholders were largely positive that aspects of the Citizens' Assembly model could be integrated into other existing collective decision-making processes in Auroville or that it could become a new, formally approved decision-making process of the Residents' Assembly, alongside other existing ones.⁶¹ Indeed, the overwhelming majority of participants felt they would trust a Citizens' Assembly process for dealing with other community issues in future, predominantly due to the randomly selected composition of the assembly, which participants felt removed potential conflict of interest and created a context where all people could express themselves. Working Group members noted its potential to "include more Aurovilians in the decision-making processes," given the higher diversity of participation in the pilot than in most official community processes. Members of the wider community also felt the model itself was promising – "it could be the answer to some of our structural governance problems in Auroville and help us bring out the best of all of us" – however, we also observed that the fact that the outcomes of this process failed to be taken up led some to reaffirm their observations that participatory processes systematically fail to produce changes in governance.

Following this evaluation, the core team explored the possibility of proposing a Residents' Assembly decision-making process on whether to include the Citizens' Assembly model as a formally mandated RA decision-making process, including defining the kinds of decisions it could be used for. However, feedback from Auroville's Working Group members was that it should be trialled a couple more times first, with different kinds of decisions (such as a Yes/No decision, rather than a policy proposal like a water vision). Meanwhile, the core team critically identified the elements of the Citizens' Assembly process that could be integrated into existing forums and processes in Auroville, and introduced these to Auroville's community decision-making process facilitators. These elements have since been included in the design of other community processes, notably the new Selection Process (2022) for Auroville's administrative bodies, for which participation is now based on random selection, a Community Budgeting Process (2022) which included educational sessions open to the whole community and facilitated deliberations with randomly selected participants, and a collaborative urban design process, Dreamweaving the Auroville Crown (2022).

As stated earlier, Auroville's "experiment" with the Citizens' Assembly model aimed not only to improve the practice of collective decision-making in Auroville. The process also sought to realise the community's foundational ideals of "human unity" and "unending education" in the context of a collective decision-making process. The

⁶¹Anshul Aggarwal, Lesley Branagan, and Suryamayi Clarence-Smith, "Auroville Citizens' Assembly Pilot: Exploring the Potential of Randomly Selected Community Members in Collective Decision-Making."

participants themselves emphasised that they were able to connect closely with Auroville's key value of human unity,⁶² through the high degree of interaction and the facilitated, small group discussions and sharing in pairs, practices that supported them to better understand and consider other people's points of view, and "dissolve polarities."⁶³ It is possible that these polarity-dissolving practices tempered the effects of demographic differences such as caste, class, gender, age and race alongside differences of opinion, however, we did not conduct specific research on this.

Participants also emphasised the educational aspects of the process, both in terms of the content and skills acquired, noting that their knowledge about the water situation in Auroville had significantly increased by the time the Citizens' Assembly finished, and that they had developed valuable skills such as identifying bias, the ability to listen, ingesting and distilling complex information, and collaborating on the creation of a vision. In the final evaluation, many stakeholders noted that they saw these capacity-building aspects as a move towards realising Auroville's key value of unending education, and further suggested that the model could help with addressing complex topics that required specialised knowledge.

One stakeholder noted that education and skill-building "are very important for the decision-making process, and could become key elements of the [long-standing format of] Residents' Assembly Decisions in future." This would fulfil the organising team's hope that the pilot would prefigure a collective culture of decision-making in the community that aligned with its ideal of unending education. While we did not conduct any formal research on the impact of the Citizens' Assembly process on Auroville's communal decision-making practice(s), as noted above we did observe that elements of the Citizens' Assembly were incorporated into community processes that followed shortly thereafter. This was evidently facilitated by the experimental, direct democratic nature of Auroville's governance and the numerous participatory processes that are held within the community as a result, as well as the local scale which enabled easy transfer of knowledge between the Citizens' Assembly organising team and other collective decision-making process designers in Auroville.

Discussion: Prefigurative Political Potential, from Experienced to Actualised

The case-study of this pilot Citizens' Assembly held in the intentional community of Auroville offers us the opportunity to reflect on some key questions currently being discussed in the literature on prefigurative politics as well as that of Citizens' Assemblies. One is the political relevance of these democratic innovations – whether they can have a lasting impact on the societies they seek to improve,⁶⁴ a consideration which we freshly examine in light of our local scale case-study. The second question is around the reproduction of such experiments – whether they can become established

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Ibid.

⁶⁴Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century"; Yates, "Rethinking Prefiguration."

practices – and the role that institutional partnerships or institutionalisation play in this.⁶⁵ The context of Auroville as an intentional community further enables us to reflect upon and examine the practice of prefiguring societal ideals, in this case prefiguring human unity in a decision-making process.⁶⁶ We begin with this contextual consideration, before addressing the two questions emerging from the literature.

The spiritualised concept of ‘human unity’ articulated by Auroville’s philosophical founding figure, Sri Aurobindo – one in which “Man must be sacred to man regardless of all distinctions of race, creed, colour, nationality, status, political or social advancement”⁶⁷ – points to the individual personal growth required to prefigure this. As highlighted by VanDerHeyden, “Aurobindo’s philosophy of integral yoga—and in his vision, Auroville—tasks the individual and humankind with the responsibility of self-discovery and personal growth in order to realise his vision of human unity.”⁶⁸ Research into how the prefigurative ideal of “human unity” is understood and pursued is limited, in Auroville and elsewhere. A study on conflict resolution practice in Auroville has shown that adherence to this foundational ideal of unity was crucial to participants’ focus on building common understanding and reconciling diverging viewpoints,⁶⁹ while previous research into decision-making processes in the community revealed that it translated into a desire for achieving one hundred per cent consensus.⁷⁰

In the context of the Auroville Citizens’ Assembly pilot, the organisers considered that fostering a sense of connection with fellow community members, rather than achieving a uniformity of views, was critical to delivering a decision-making process that prefigured “an actual human unity.”⁷¹ This often took the form of facilitating playful group activities (in addition to capacity building around bias and listening). Indeed, research on community-building⁷² has foregrounded the importance of shared

⁶⁵ Clarence-Smith and Monticelli, “Flexible Institutionalisation in Auroville”; Cooper, “Towards an Adventurous Institutional Politics”; Courant, “Deliberative Democracy, Legitimacy, and Institutionalisation.”

⁶⁶ Anita Chari, “The Political Potential of Mindful Embodiment,” *New Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2016): 226–40, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2016.1153192>; Karen T. Litfin, “The Contemplative Pause: Insights for Teaching Politics in Turbulent Times,” *Journal of Political Science Education* 16, no. 1 (2020): 57–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2018.1512869>; James K. Rowe, “Micropolitics and Collective Liberation: Mind/Body Practice and Left Social Movements,” *New Political Science* 38, no. 2 (2016): 206–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07393148.2016.1153191>.

⁶⁷ Sri Aurobindo, “The Human Cycle,” CWSA Vol 25 (Pondicherry, India: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1997), 565.

⁶⁸ M. VanDerHeyden, “Towards Human Unity: Realising Conscious Communication as Development. Three Case Studies in Auroville, South India” (MA Thesis, The American University of Paris, 2020), <https://aurorepo.in/id/eprint/177/>.

⁶⁹ Datla, Chaitanya, “The Constructive Role of Conflict in an Intentional Community: Auroville as a Case-Study.” (MSc Thesis, Northeastern University, 2014).

⁷⁰ Clarence-Smith, “Towards a Spiritualised Society: Auroville, an Experiment in Prefigurative Utopianism.” Note: This aspiration for consensus was reflected in the Citizens’ Assembly process as well, where participants were dissatisfied with the use of individual rating to arrive at the final outcome (as opposed to some form of collaborative decision-making).

⁷¹ Mother, “Auroville Charter.”

⁷² Anthony Cohen, ed., *Symbolising Boundaries: Identity and Diversity in British Cultures* (Manchester, UK; Wolfeboro, NH: Manchester University Press, 1986).

experiences that can effectively “incorporate and enclose difference.”⁷³ Other decision-making processes in Auroville have included personal growth practices such as moments of silence, meditation, and reflection on the core values and ideals of Auroville to create a spiritually prefigurative atmosphere.⁷⁴ While political scientist Anita Chari argues that such embodied practices develop relational capacities that may give rise to “new political potentials,”⁷⁵ the inclusion of these practices is an ongoing source of contention within the community, in part because these are felt by some to not contribute meaningfully to the quality of decisions taken.⁷⁶ In the case of the Auroville Citizens’ Assembly pilot, some participants specifically felt that personal growth practices were not relevant to achieving the outcome of a water vision for Auroville. However, the capacity-building components around bias and listening, aimed at fostering better dialogue, were highly valued. Participants reported that these new skills would change the way they participated in collective decision-making processes in future, having enabled them to connect to Auroville’s ideal of human unity by growing in their understanding of others.⁷⁷ Therefore, following VanDerHeyden, we suggest that, in a best case scenario, building consciousness – from an Aurobindonian perspective – can hold the “potential to participate in dialogue as an opportunity to transform one’s self and the world at large.”⁷⁸

The same potential for transformation has been said more widely of the opportunity to participate in intentional community living. Sargisson’s research underscores that members experience intentional communities as spaces in which they can play “a transformative role” in prefiguring societal change, and this could have a far-reaching impact.⁷⁹ But while the experience of experimenting with alternatives can be meaningful for the people engaged in these, we return to our first question concerning the political relevance of prefigurative experiments: Do experimental, collective processes have any lasting impact on the societies they seek to improve? Even in cases where Citizens’ Assemblies are led by governments, political relevance remains an issue, notably when mainstream political will does not align with the outcome of an Assembly. For instance, French President Macron, who had called for the French Citizens’ Climate Convention in 2019, did not honour his promise to pass on the Assembly’s unedited recommendations to Parliament or a referendum; less than half were included in a climate bill submitted to Parliament to debate. With this case-study, our aim was less focussed on addressing the on-going question about whether prefigurative politics can articulate an alternative to mainstream power, but rather to

⁷³Anthony Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London, UK: Routledge, 1989).

⁷⁴Clarence-Smith, “Towards a Spiritualised Society: Auroville, an Experiment in Prefigurative Utopianism.”

⁷⁵Chari, “The Political Potential of Mindful Embodiment,” 236.

⁷⁶Clarence-Smith, “Towards a Spiritualised Society: Auroville, an Experiment in Prefigurative Utopianism.”

⁷⁷A. Aggarwal, L. Branagan, and S. Clarence-Smith, “Auroville Citizens’ Assembly Pilot: Exploring the Potential of Randomly Selected Community Members in Collective Decision-Making.”

⁷⁸VanDerHeyden, “Towards Human Unity,” 46.

⁷⁹Sargisson, *Utopian Bodies and the Politics of Transgression*, 29.

consider what transformative potential such practice might have when engaged in at a local scale. Many Auroville community members suggested that the Citizens' Assembly could become a new model for decision-making in Auroville, and most participants expressed that they would trust in future Citizens' Assembly processes.⁸⁰ However, our views align with those of participants and organisers who were concerned that incorporating the Citizens' Assembly model into an official community decision-making process may stifle its potential for further evolution, uniquely facilitated by the small-scale, experimental political context of Auroville; one water expert expressed that they would rather see the model "as a repeating process that continues to evolve aside from the "traditional" working groups [administrative bodies]."⁸¹ Indeed, the primary purpose of the pilot was to *improve* the *process* of collective decision-making in Auroville, rather than establishing a new model.

Notably, the Auroville Citizens' Assembly pilot was followed by a unique, multi-stakeholder collaborative urban design process ("Dreamweaving the Auroville Crown 2022") on a conflictual issue, in which elements of the Citizens' Assembly model were incorporated to foster inclusivity and promote understanding, and educate the community at large on the planning process, a practice which is still ongoing.⁸² Previously, the urban design process for Auroville (which seeks to grow into a township), did not include meaningful participatory planning practice. In contrast, this model was successful in drawing together many stakeholders in a collective decision-making process. However, the Dreamweaving's outcomes also failed to be implemented (as we explain further below).

This brings us to the question of whether institutionalisation might be enabling, and even necessary, for ensuring the adoption of prefigurative experiments and democratic innovations – as raised by Courant,⁸³ Clarence-Smith & Monticelli⁸⁴ – or whether institutionalisation represents a risk of co-optation or nullification, as raised by Monticelli⁸⁵ and van de Sande.⁸⁶ The Auroville Assembly was a grassroots experimental initiative, and did not have the authority or legitimacy to instruct existing bodies to implement its outcomes. Community concerns raised regarding the adoption of the outcomes of its pilot Citizens' Assembly were related to the lack of formal implementation pathways and bodies, exacerbated in the experimental context of Auroville, given that it has no overarching governing body or hierarchical structure. The strategy of forming an implementation team to take the outcomes of the assembly forward – while only partly successful in the Auroville context – could be explored

⁸⁰A. Aggarwal, L. Branagan, and S. Clarence-Smith, "Auroville Citizens' Assembly Pilot: Exploring the Potential of Randomly Selected Community Members in Collective Decision-Making."

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²A. Aggarwal et al., "Dreamweaving the Auroville Crown 2022" (Auroville, India: 2022).

⁸³Courant, "Deliberative Democracy, Legitimacy, and Institutionalisation."

⁸⁴Clarence-Smith and Monticelli, "Flexible Institutionalisation in Auroville."

⁸⁵Monticelli, "Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century."

⁸⁶van de Sande, "Fighting with Tools."

for other Citizens' Assemblies whose outcomes are not taken up by an existing institutional process. This could take the form of an association or non-governmental organisation to follow-up on the recommendations of Citizens' Assembly processes, implementable at grassroots local/regional scales.

In the case of the Dreamweaving urban design process that followed, its outcomes failed to be implemented due to the imposition of a mainstream government agenda, namely a top-down urban development approach enforced in the community in 2021 by government authorities. This disregard further exposes the vulnerabilities of prefigurative political practices, highlighted in the literature, at the point when such citizen-led local or regional initiatives must engage with – or are confronted by – “mainstream” power structures, notably that of cooptation.⁸⁷ Although this substantiates concerns about the political relevance of prefigurative politics, the threat to democracy currently posed by authoritarian administrations worldwide makes the cultivation of democratic processes, skills, and practices, as is done in Citizens' Assemblies,⁸⁸ a vital grassroots measure to resist the erosion of democratic processes.

Conclusion: A Case for Continued Experimentation

Our case study – set in an intentional community shaped by ideals of “human unity” and “unending education” – is a prefigurative enactment of a Citizens' Assembly. In the Auroville context, a politically self-organised community that embodies perhaps the longest-standing exercise of direct democracy,⁸⁹ the Citizens' Assembly model was used in an attempt to address key failings of the mode, notably (and paradoxically) equitable participation.⁹⁰ The deliberative Citizens' Assembly model was perceived as having potential to foster equitable participation by virtue of the opportunities the model offered to prefigure Auroville's foundational ideals of “human unity” and “unending education” (such as deliberative discussions and educational sessions) – which were seen to be lacking in Auroville's political practice. Although the community had concerns around implementation of the pilot's outcomes – concerns of political relevance common to prefigurative experiments more broadly – the social reproduction of the process itself shows promise. While Auroville's potential adoption of the process may have to contend with demands of formalisation, continued experimentation with elements of the model is already underway within the community – an encouraging consideration for pursuing prefigurative political practice at local scales. In the face of the political, state-led suppression of democratic values experienced globally, such local – or perhaps even regional – experimentation with practices that engage and empower citizens to prefigure equitable modes of political decision-making could be critical to the continued advancement of democratic practices worldwide, including

⁸⁷Monticelli, “Embodying Alternatives to Capitalism in the 21st Century.”

⁸⁸Carson, “Creating Democratic Surplus through Citizens' Assemblies.”

⁸⁹Clarence-Smith, “Towards a Spiritualised Society: Auroville, an Experiment in Prefigurative Utopianism.”

⁹⁰Hardt and Negri, *Assembly*.

the prefiguration of diverse and differently scaled articulations of participatory governance.

Our analysis yields distinctive empirical insights to the scholarship of both Citizens' Assemblies and prefigurative politics; drawing these two literatures together in a unique theoretical approach. Citizens' Assemblies have heretofore not been featured in the literature on prefiguration. However, the case study discussed here shows that these strands of literature have much to contribute to each other as each allows us to examine different realities which a Citizens' Assembly – as a democratic tool – must shape and engage, particularly as they aim to uphold specific spiritual and self-governance values.

Disclosure Statement

The first stage of the research leading to this article (the pilot Citizens' Assembly and its formal evaluation) received funding from the Sri Aurobindo Institute of International Educational Research, an organisation based in the Auroville community, where the pilot was undertaken. The further project of this academic article, and supplementary research for the same, was undertaken independently and without funding by the authors. While the authors are both members of the Auroville community, we have clearly explained our positionality in the article, as activist participant-ethnographers. We therefore perceive no conflict of interest.

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