Citizens' Assemblies and European Green Deal

A perfect (mis)match?

Citizens' Assemblies and the European Green Deal: A Perfect (Mis)Match?

The **Green European Foundation (GEF)** is a European-level political foundation whose mission is to contribute to a lively European sphere of debate and to foster greater citizen involvement in European politics. GEF strives to mainstream discussions on European policies and politics both within and beyond the Green political family. The foundation acts as a laboratory for new ideas and offers cross-border political education and a platform for cooperation and exchange at the European level.

The **Institute for Political Ecology (IPE)** is a research and educational organisation that designs alternative development models and innovative institutional frameworks for democratic political and economic transformation of society. The Institute addresses contemporary ecological changes as social phenomena that reduce or magnify social inequalities and influence power relations. IPE carries out transdisciplinary research and educational programs in cooperation with domestic and international institutions and organisations. Based on these, IPE provides expert analyses and a discussion platform for social movements and political and economic actors in Croatia and abroad that advocate ecologically sustainable, just and democratic society.

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Dirk Holemans, Honorary President of the Green European Foundation

Foreword

Dirk Holemans

If one thing is underestimated in our turbulent times - where every year seems to add yet another major challenge – it is the importance of respecting the demos, the people that, one way or another, should rule in our democracies.

Today, the opposite seems the case. More and more citizens, feeling unheard and not respected, are turning their backs on democratic processes or are voting for authoritarian leaders. The idea that democracy is a much richer perspective and reality than electing representatives is no longer present in many people's minds. As a result, they report themselves democratically absent, as it were.

In this situation, top-down policies that don't consider the day-to-day worries of citizens – such as the cost of living and making it to the end of the month – are doomed to be fragile and meet resistance. They certainly won't inspire the support of groups of citizens fighting to keep them. It is a pity to say but the European Green Deal fits as such a top-down set of policies that never was able (or wanted?) to conquer the minds and hearts of its European constituency.

At the same time, Eurobarometer and other polls indicate that most people remain really worried about climate disruption and do support climate action. Moreover, citizens' assemblies in different countries and cities show that citizens coming together propose, more often than governments, bold policies to address the climate crisis while also considering social aspects.

This creates a unique opportunity to redesign the Green Deal bottom-up. Without having the illusion that this could provide a silver bullet solution, imagine implementing citizens' assemblies across Europe – let's say in one hundred towns and cities – on how participants envision a wellbeing economy that allows all people to thrive within planetary boundaries. This could result in an abundant harvest of great proposals and inspiring perspectives, and fuel the ambition to work on a futureproof European Union, where democratic revival, resilience and true sustainability go hand in hand. In this publication, you will find the background and inspiring examples to contribute to this crucial task. Because, if not now, then when?

Introduction and Theory

A Note from the Authors

by Vedran Horvat, Director of the Institute for Political Ecology

This publication is the result of a collaborative process between partner organisations from Belgium, Croatia, Finland, North Macedonia, and Serbia within the project *Green Deal for All – Citizen's Assemblies in Action*, organised by the Green European Foundation. Recognising the huge gap between the top-down implementation of the European Green Deal – reduced merely to a series of technological and financial measures – and the needs of various societies and communities across Europe, our aim was to explore the role citizens' assemblies can play in ensuring its bottom-up democratisation.

The recent deliberative wave across Europe has been a result of both the evident democratic deficit within European policymaking and the apparent need of citizens to play a role in the implementation of policies that affect their quality of life and their environment. This surge aimed to compensate for the lack of citizen involvement in decision-making on the green transition and empower civic participation in this area. For us Greens, citizen agency is essential for the success of this paradigm shift. Yet in most cases, the implementation of the European Green Deal and the citizens' assemblies that made up the deliberative wave have not been synchronized or coordinated, quite the contrary. In most cases, these deliberative forums were organised in direct response to the lack of democratic procedures and processes that were expected to anchor the European Green Deal in our societies.

Our research and collective learning focused on citizens' assemblies that deliberated on issues related to the European Green Deal – climate change and adaptation, agroecology, biodiversity, air quality – in different parts of Europe (Italy, Belgium, Ireland, Serbia, and Spain). During the EGD's first implementation phase, awareness grew within the green political movement that citizens and their needs had not been sufficiently taken into account, resulting in the contestation or rejection of a number of its measures (exemplified by the *gilets jaunes* movement in France). In this context, citizens' assemblies played an important role in enabling citizens voices to be heard, though in some cases their recommendations did not immediately become fully effective. As Greens, we believe that citizens' assemblies are hugely important: they are our allies on the ground, demonstrating that democracy is a valuable and inevitable dimension of the green transition. We hope that this publication can make a small contribution to the generous invitation they inspire: to join forces for the achievement of a successful green transition across the whole of Europe and beyond.

Values and Ideas

A democratic green transition

The European Green Deal (EGD) was designed to ensure a sustainable future for Europe and its citizens by countering the climate change and environmental degradation that present an existential threat to ecosystems and human civilisation. To achieve its aim of transforming Europe into a climate-neutral continent, where economic growth is decoupled from resource use, the plan foresees a reduction in CO_2 emissions by at least 55 per cent by 2030. This relies on a combination of climate, energy, transport and taxation policies, among others.

However, this ambitious yet essential plan is heavily dependent on technological innovation, industry, and a mere redirection of financial flows. The EGD broadly ignores the social dimensions of the complex, cross-sectoral policy implementation it requires, failing to integrate the principles of fairness, equality, and redistribution into its policies and putting Europe's most affected and vulnerable communities at risk. The mismatch between this top-down project and the bottom-up need to anchor policy implementation in our communities, cities, and regions underlines the huge gap between the experiences of those

who are introducing its measures and those who are most affected by them.

One of the most illustrative examples of this is provided by the European Climate Pact (ECP), an important pillar of the European Green Deal. The Climate Pact frames the idea of climate change as a problem of insufficient participation, reinforcing particular narratives around the role of public participation in the EGD. According to political scientist Feyyaz Barış Çelik, "By individualizing climate responsibilities, framing citizens as consumers or customers, and applying a tiered approach to participation, the ECP – like the broader strategy of EGD – overlooked how climate change disproportionately affects marginalised communities with limited access to the resources and political influence needed to participate in climate action."[1]

In order for the systemic change foreseen by the green transition to be successful, the EGD's vision and its accompanying policy measures must penetrate all levels of society. The adaptability of these policies to specific sectoral areas or community needs is key in order to reduce the risk of rejection, as in

the case of the yellow vests (*gilets jaunes*) in France. This can only be achieved with and through citizen engagement, empowerment, participation, and ownership. Citizens themselves are agents of change who hold the keys to a sustainable and just future, which cannot simply be delivered top-down by the EU institutions or national governments. Phoenix, an EU Horizon 2020-funded project focused on democratic innovation, emphasises that "we must not forget the role of democratic governance in stabilising paradigmatic changes, such the one that the European Green Deal will entail." These democratic governance processes should "collect the positions of people that usually do not engage in politics, as well as reaching a consensus on the best policies for the territories under investigation'." [2]

Since the early years of the EGD, announced as a "man on the moon" moment for the future of Europe,[3] there has been an evident lack of initiative to improve its overall implementation and governance process through more participation and inclusion. Moves to organise participatory-deliberative processes on the implementation of European Green Deal, whether at national, regional, or local level, were in fact notable for their absence.[4] For a pivotal green transition project such as this, the lack of a democratic dimension was surprising and disappointing.

That said, our democracies are not designed in a way that facilitates citizen engagement and participation. On the contrary, citizens must claim and fight for their right to participate in decision-making processes, over and again. Citizens' assemblies[5] provide an effective framework for this participation and can be an important source of social and political power.

By happy accident, the launch of the European Green Deal coincided with a wave of deliberative assemblies across Europe, made up of hundreds of citizens'

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assemblies and "deliberative mini-publics."[6] Within this wave, two general drivers can be identified: improving democratic governance and informing decision makers with research-based knowledge. In many cases, citizens' assemblies were established as a self-organised response to citizen exclusion or a lack of democracy, or as a pro-active initiative to address certain policy failures or to propose new or improved legislation. More rarely, they were brought to life by certain governmental bodies, whether by commissioning or direct organisation, and often in response to nudges or appeals.▪ Very often, the focus of these assemblies centred on issues relevant for the EGD, including climate change, biodiversity, the energy transition, and air pollution. Despite this, they only rarely found direct resonance with European Green Deal policymakers.[8]

▪ Strangely enough, while values inherent to deliberative democracy are a good fit with the political agendas of more left-wing parties, these parties were the least engaged in fostering deliberative democratic processes. It appears that the more distant a party's ideology from direct and deliberative democracy, the more inclined it is to use citizens' assemblies – perhaps in order to compensate. For Greens in particular, citizens' assemblies are potential allies in reaching key objectives: increased wellbeing, higher ecological sustainability, and greater democracy. There is also a high level of compatibility between Green values and those that underpin citizens' assemblies. Despite these commonalities, this potential connection seems to be far from explored, with Greens often tending to keep their distance from participatory-deliberative processes.

Beyond representative democracy

Representative democracy largely forms the basis of modern democratic states. However, this form of decision-making has various limitations. This section will examine a number of these and suggest how deliberative democracy could be used to address them. It also provides a broader context in which to understand the potential role and relevance of citizens' assemblies.

Representation

Political representatives are expected to represent the views of their constituents. However, it is impossible for a limited number of representatives to perfectly reflect the diverse views of an entire population,

as the former will act based on their own subjective experiences. This especially becomes an issue when parliaments are not sufficiently representative. For example, politicians tend to be wealthier and with more advanced education than the populations they represent, which tells of a disconnect between the class and professions of politicians versus the general population.[9] While women and (certain) minorities are increasingly better represented in most Western European parliaments, lower-educated or practically trained people are far less present. Many feel increasingly "left behind" in society and unrepresented – also in terms of their culture and way of life – within these "diploma democracies" dominated by wealthier and higher educated citizens. As such, their problems and concerns are not as easily picked up in parliament.

Moreover, many voters find that they are represented by a candidate they did not vote for. Some electoral systems are better than others at converting votes into actual seats in parliament, but even in the most representative electoral systems, these issues persist. Furthermore, while constitutions and other instruments are put in place to protect minority rights in democracies, majority rule can nevertheless sideline the interests of minority groups.

Deliberative bodies provide structured spaces for a more diverse range of citizens than that found among elected political representatives to voice their views. The randomised selection of participants can achieve a different, if not better, representation of ideological, class, ethnic, social, and many other differences within a constituency. This difference is particularly pronounced in political systems with less representative political institutions. In some places, deliberative bodies may be the only forum in which people from minority groups can have a say in official political matters,

especially if the appropriate quotas are set in place.

Participation

Many representative democracies are facing problems around declining voter turnout. This can be linked to multiple factors, including low trust in the ability to achieve political change, the feeling that no political candidate truly represents a certain individual's views, or cumbersome voting processes. In current democratic systems, the voter plays a very passive role, delegating power to others via elections every few years. Aside from voting, actual citizen participation is limited to influencing political representatives through actions such as petitions or demonstrations. Deliberation is assumed to occur primarily within representative institutions.

These issues can be addressed to some degree by facilitating the involvement of more diverse groups of people in party politics. Going one step further, citizens' assemblies (and/or similar models including citizen panels or "mini-publics") enable greater political engagement and empowerment. This can have transformative impacts. Among these is an enhanced view of democracy in general if the state is seen as giving more value to the opinions of citizens. In addition, if deliberation is given weight in society in general, even voting processes that are seen as unwieldy could be considered more worthwhile. As such, by fostering more direct and inclusive decision-making through one institution, the entire democratic culture of an entire state could be enhanced.

Short-term decision-making

Regular election cycles can result in decision-making oriented towards short-term gains, at the expense of long-term strategies, in order to maximise politicians' chance of re-election. Urgent issues that

"Instead of engaging in the zero-sum game of partisan politics, citizens' assembly participants work towards a common goal."

require long-term solutions may be put on hold if there are more immediate concerns. Climate change and biodiversity loss are good examples of this.

Citizens' assemblies can be used to overcome this. They can afford to put emphasis on long-term planning, since their members are not subject to election. The immediate needs of a society can be weighed against its long-term needs and how these also affects others. Solutions that do not have an immediate payoff and may actually have higher short-term costs tend to be unpopular, but could be more easily identified and advocated for by a non-elected consensus-building institution than by an institution constantly operating in the contest of upcoming competitive elections.

Special interests

While politicians legislate on all issues, they clearly cannot be experts on everything. This can lead to uninformed decisions that may not be in the best interests of citizens or the state. More commonly, though, this situation leads to dependence on extra-parliamentary expert knowledge, which opens up the possibility of interest groups exerting significant power on legislative priorities and the law-making process. Political lobbyists with sizeable budgets at their disposal, especially those employed by large companies, work to influence representatives, while donations can also be made to the election campaigns of politicians that would advance a certain agenda, even if this is not in the interest of the people – or the environment.

Deliberative institutions, in contrast, can draw on expert knowledge in a more transparent way. The members of a citizens' assembly are not expected to be experts, nor are they required to articulate a stance combining political ideology and the perceived interest of the public, as is commonly the case with elected representatives. Instead, the emphasis lies more on a diversity of perspectives. Moreover, lay knowledge is not just accepted, it is valued. Lastly, as assembly participants do not have to organise expensive election campaigns, this prevents special interest groups from wielding financial influence in the form of donations.

Polarisation

Decision-making oriented around partisan politics can increase polarisation, as parties seek to differentiate themselves from others in order to make choices clearer to voters. Political parties and their representatives are incentivised to create social wedges in order to build a clear platform. Polarisation can lead to political gridlock, and in the most serious cases, violent political conflicts or even genocide.

Deliberative democracy, on the other hand, encourages dialogue, mutual understanding, and consensus-building, which are obvious antidotes to polarisation. Instead of engaging in the zero-sum game of partisan politics, citizens' assembly participants work towards a common goal. Dialogue reduces misconceptions on the motives of those with differing opinions, while the absence of elections and political groupings removes incentives to create wedge issues for differentiation. Overall, deliberative institutions have the potential for a much more cooperative and constructive form of decision-making.

Populism

Staying up to date with current affairs and the complexities of politics can be difficult and time-consuming. This can lead voters to make decisions based on the limited or biased information that is readily available to them. For their part, politicians can promote policies that are popular, have emotional appeal, and seem like a good solution to a

complex problem but in fact are detrimental to the long-term well-being of society. Such populist actors may also use minorities as scapegoats, which can lead to a rise in hate crimes – or worse.

Deliberative democracy discourages the use of oversimplified solutions to complex issues. Providing participants with diverse backgrounds with comprehensive information and the space to discuss an issue thoroughly before arriving at a consensus discourages decision-making based on emotion or limited information. Expert consultation helps simplify complex issues. Furthermore, citizens' assemblies can help the wider public accept a complex solution to a complex challenge as opposed to a simplistic and ultimately harmful solution with populist appeal.

Controversial issues and wicked problems

Political representatives are voted in on the basis of particular opinions on issues of importance in their constituency. They are discouraged from changing their minds as this can result in a loss of votes. This is especially true when it comes to controversial topics such as reproductive rights, drug policy, or large-scale construction projects. These are issues where subjective morality and expectations on how the state should react are central, or where change would have a significant effect on a community or environment. Wicked problems can be defined as problems that are difficult, if not impossible, to solve because of their complex and changing nature and the many actors that are involved. Climate change and biodiversity loss are examples of such problems. The proposed solutions to wicked problems very often meet with controversy.

Deliberative democracy has a better ability to tackle difficult issues and problems. By fostering respectful dialogue among citizens with differing perspectives and encouraging

Citizens' assemblies can help the wider public accept a complex solution to a complex challenge as opposed to a simplistic and ultimately harmful solution with populist appeal.

the weighing of various perspectives, including the long-term effects, as well as the consideration of evidence, deliberative processes can help build consensus and offer better solutions. Some issues may not be controversial or wicked but still require better public engagement. For example, constitutional changes or other kinds of reform to democratic institutions require significant public consultation in order to gain democratic legitimacy.

Endnotes

1   Feyyaz Barış Çelik (2025). "Unpacking democratic participation in the European Green Deal: the case of Climate Pact". *Journal of European Integration*, 47(2), pp. 173-192. https://doi.org/10.1080/07036337.2025.2455688

2   https://phoenix-horizon.eu/project/

3   European Commission (2019). "Press remarks by President von der Leyen on the occasion of the adoption of the European Green Deal Communication". SPEECH/19/6749. 11 December 2019. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6749

4   One of the rare but distinctively successful examples is the REAL_DEAL project: https://www.realdeal.eu/the_real_deal_project. Still, its existence does not compensate for the lack of an overall coordinated project to raise awareness of the European Green Deal among diverse audiences across the European Union.

5   Broadly defined as "a representative group of citizens who are selected at random from the population to learn about, deliberate upon, and make recommendations in relation to a particular issue or set of issues" – see https://citizensassembly.co.uk/.

6   Rodrigo Ramis-Moyano et al. (2025). "Mini-Publics and Party Ideology: Who Commissioned the Deliberative Wave in Europe?". *Journal of Deliberative Democracy, 21(1), pp. 1–15.* https://doi.org/10.16997/jdd.1559

7   European Commission (2019). "The European Green Deal (Online)". https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/european-green-deal_en

8   Strangely enough, while values inherent to deliberative democracy are a good fit with the political agendas of more left-wing parties, these parties were the least engaged in fostering deliberative democratic processes. It appears that the more distant a party's ideology from direct and deliberative democracy, the more inclined it is to use citizens' assemblies – perhaps in order to compensate. For Greens in particular, citizens' assemblies are potential allies in reaching key objectives: increased wellbeing, higher ecological sustainability, and greater democracy. There is also a high level of compatibility between Green values and those that underpin citizens' assemblies. Despite these commonalities, this potential connection seems to be far from explored, with Greens often tending to keep their distance from participatory-deliberative processes.

9   Armen Hakhverdian (2015). "Does it Matter that Most Representatives are Higher Educated?". *Swiss Political Science Review, 21(2), pp. 237–245.* https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12166

Theory and Literature

Why citizens' assemblies?

One of the strongest criticisms aimed at the European Green Deal today is its failure to incorporate major citizen consultation and adequately respond to the socio-economic concerns of the population. The EGD was not based on any real form of democratic process, whether at local, regional or national level, even though the ecological transition it aims to bring about is one of the greatest challenges the EU faces. We need this transition, not only to avoid climate and environmental collapse, but also to ensure good living and working conditions for EU citizens into the future. While the chronological overlap between the introduction of the European Green Deal and a deliberative wave across Europe appears merely accidental, it is nevertheless striking.

If we want the ecological transition to be systemic, deep, and impactful, it needs to be conducted in an inclusive and fair manner designed to allow the involvement, participation, and contribution of members of the public. This type of deliberative process should precede the design and development of initiatives such as the EGD to ensure that they are rooted in the assessment of real needs and respond to the various challenges inherent in large-scale change from the very start. Citizens' assemblies can play a key role, and although the initial opportunity was missed, it is still not too late to broaden and strengthen the democratic dimension of the EGD.

The technocratic design of the EGD, that narrows down most measures to the financial, legal, or technological level, has been decisive in calibrating its very character, and thereby also its failures and rejections. These risks have not disappeared, and in fact the Clean Industrial Deal looks set to make the same mistakes when it comes to ignoring both deliberation and participation. Amid so-called *greenlash*, the European Commission is not choosing to meet and mitigate the concerns of its citizens, but rather watering down its ecological agenda with a focus on EU competitiveness, efficiency, and large industries.[1]

With most European citizens still supporting the EU's ambitions to become climate neutral and significantly reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the next decade, such a competitiveness and deregulation agenda

risks only widening the gap between people's concerns and EU policy reactions.

For any iteration of the European Green Deal, it is of vital importance that the European institutions build trust and alliances with can provide credible long-term responses to citizens' key concerns – whether those be the costs of the energy transition, developing compensation mechanisms through public funds, or creating green jobs and preserving livelihoods. Only then can these plans be both effective and efficient.[2]

The purpose of this project and report is therefore to explore the specific ways in which citizens' assemblies could play a constructive and instrumental role in the ecological transition, supporting the progressive elements of the EGD and improving on its shortfalls. Within this context, the following three elements are key:

1. Deliberative processes and other democratic innovations - in order to improve policy solutions and increase legitimacy

2. Justice and fairness - in order to ensure that the specific interests and needs of vulnerable people and communities are acknowledged, communicated, integrated into policies to produce the fairest solutions

3. Inclusion and intersectionality - intersectional awareness of gender, race, class, and other inequalities - in order to both avoid reproducing and to tackle these inequalities within concrete policy instruments.

Deliberation defined

A citizens' assembly is a specific form of deliberative democratic process. *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* describes deliberative democracy as follows:

If we want the ecological transition to be systemic, deep, and impactful, it needs to be conducted in an inclusive and fair manner designed to allow the involvement, participation, and contribution of members of the public.

"Deliberative democracy is grounded in an ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives. [W]e define *deliberation* itself minimally to mean *mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern.* Defining it this way minimises the positive valence that attaches to the word 'deliberation' itself, so that we can then speak of 'good' and 'bad' deliberation without 'bad deliberation' being a contradiction in terms. We define *deliberative democracy* as any practice of democracy that gives deliberation a central place."[3]

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has published a number of reports on deliberative democracy.[4] Its 2020 report, *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, was the first empirical, comparative study of the use of representative deliberative processes for the purpose of public decision-making. In these reports, deliberation and deliberative democracy are defined as follows:

"**Deliberation** [...] refers to public deliberation (as opposed to internal deliberation) and to group deliberation (as opposed to individual deliberation), which emphasises the need to find common ground [...] **Deliberative democracy** is the wider political theory that claims that political decisions should be a result of fair and reasonable discussion among citizens. Gastil and Levine's *Deliberative Democracy Handbook* (2005) argues that 'deliberative democracy strengthens citizen voices in governance by including people of all races, classes, ages and geographies in deliberations that directly affect public decisions.'"[5]

While these definitions are very similar, the OECD report stresses the importance of deliberation being public instead of "internal" and that its aim is to find common ground. The extent to which deliberation within a citizens' assembly is "public" depends on how it is constituted. Generally speaking, citizens' assemblies indeed try to work towards a policy proposal that grows from common ground between assembly members and that is supported by a large majority.

The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy contrasts deliberative democracy with aggregative democracy, i.e., the casting of votes of equal weight, whereas the OECD's 2020 report differentiates it from participatory democracy, which aims to ensure the participation of large numbers of people, thus achieving breadth instead of deep deliberation. Both aggregative and participatory democracy focus on the involvement

▪ "Participatory democracy has a slightly longer history, gaining ground with the activist movements of the 1960s that demanded greater participation in government decision making (e.g. civil rights, women's liberation movements, see Pateman, 1970). A central tenet to later work on participatory democracy is that it must increase the capacities of citizens to participate, which necessitates reform of democratic institutions to make participation more meaningful."

of many people as possible. In every democratic model, there is indeed a trade-off between the quality or depth of deliberation and the number of participants. Most established liberal democracies combine elements of deliberation and aggregation. Participatory democracy as defined by the OECD also includes activist movements that often operate outside of governmental institutions, in contrast to citizens' assemblies, which are often established on governmental initiative.

Citizens' assemblies belong to a sub-category of deliberative democracy known as representative deliberative processes. The OECD report defines these as follows:

"Representative deliberative processes are often referred to in shorthand as deliberative processes, and the term is used

interchangeably with deliberative mini-public. It refers to a randomly selected group of people who are broadly representative of a community spending significant time learning and collaborating through facilitated deliberation to form collective recommendations for policy makers."[6]

The OECD report identifies 12 models of representative deliberative processes (see Figure 1), noting that this list is not necessarily exhaustive. At the time of its publication in 2020, there was only one existing example of a permanent citizens' assembly, which is categorised in the report as a standalone model: the Ostbelgien ("East Belgium") model. Since then, many more have been established worldwide.

According to the report, the "citizens' assembly" model is the "most robust and elaborate model of representative deliberative processes", of which it identifies three key characteristics:[7]

	Average number of participants per panel	Average Length of Meetings	Average length from first to last meeting	Number of times used to date process (panels)	Used by countries	Result	Policy questions addressed to date
Informed citizen recommendations on policy questions							
Citizens' Assembly	90	18.8 days	47 weeks	6 (6)	CAN, IRL	Detailed, collective recommendations	Electoral reforms, institutional setup, constitutional questions
Citizens' Jury/Panel	34	4.1 days	5 weeks	115 (168)	AUT, AUS, BEL, CAN, FRA, POL, ESP, GBR, USA	Collective recommendations	Broad range of topics. Most common: infrastructure, health, urban planning, environment
a) consecutive day meetings	30	3.4 days	0 weeks	23(40)			
b) non-consecutive day meetings	35	4.1 days	7 weeks	90(126)			Ongoing processes needing input on various questions when public authority is in need
c) ongoing	32	11 days	2 years	2(2)	CAN		
Consensus Conference	16	4.0 days	2 weeks	19(19)	AUS, AUT, DNK, FRA, NOR, GBR	Collective recommendations	New technology, environment, health
Planning Cell	24	3.2 days	0 weeks	57(247)	DEU, JAP	Collective position report/citizens report	Most common use for urban planning, but also other topics
Citizen opinion on policy questions							
G1000	346	1.7 days	4 weeks	12(12)	NLD, ESP	Votes on proposals	Strategic planning: developing a future vision for the city
Citizens' Council	15	1.7 days	1 week	14(24)	AUT, DEU	Collective recommendations	Various topics, most common: environment, strategic planning
Citizens' Dialogues	148	2.1 days	4 week	38(112)	Globally	Broad ideas/ recommendations	Various topics, often several addressed at once
Deliberative Poll/Survey	226	1.6 days	0 weeks	14(15)	ARG, ITA, JAP, USA, KOR, MNG, CHN, BRA	Survey opinions and opinion changes	Various topics
Deliberative Poll/Survey	120	1 day	0 weeks	4(150)	Globally	Votes on proposals	Environment issues on a global scale
Informed citizen evaluation of ballot measures							
Citizens' Initiative Review	22	22 days	0 weeks	8(8)	USA	Collective statement of key facts	Various topics
Permanent deliberative bodies							
The Ostbelgien Model	24	No data yet	1.5 years	1(1)	BEL	Collective recommendations	Mandate to set the agenda and initiate citizens' panels
City Observatory	49	8 days	1 year	1(1)	ESP	Decisions on citizen proposals	Mandate to evaluate citizen proposals and recommend "actions

Note: All calculations for this table have been made by the authors on the basis of the data from the 289 cases, which together feature 763 separate deliberative panels, collected for this study, from OECD Member and non-Member countries. The average length from first to last meeting of the Planning Cell is an exception due to lack of data. In this instance, Nexus Institute, the principal organisation implementing Planning Cells in Germany, was consulted. The overall average length of meetings of Citizens Jury/Panel is calculated not including the ongoing processes.
Source: OECD Database of Representative Deliberative Processes and Institutions

Figure 1. Models of representative deliberative processes. Source: OECD (2020), *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*. OECD Publishing: Paris.

1. **Deliberation**, which involves: weighing carefully different options, […] accurate and relevant information and a diversity of perspectives […], and a requirement for participants to […] find common ground to reach a group decision;

2. **Representativeness**, achieved through random sampling from which a representative selection is made to ensure the group broadly matches the demographic profile of the community against census or other similar data, and;

3. **Impact**, meaning decision makers agree to respond to and act on recommendations."

These characteristics are linked to the key stages of a citizens' assembly. First, a representative group of citizens is brought together by weighted random selection. This group of citizens then deliberates on an issue. Finally, it formulates recommendations, which should be responded to and acted upon by decision-makers. These stages will be discussed in more detail in the following section, but an illustrative example can be seen in Figure 2.

Key elements of citizens' assemblies

As a form of representative deliberative processes, citizens' assemblies are made up of three key elements, as identified in the previous section: representativeness, deliberation, and impact.

The following section investigates these elements in more detail. It makes it clear that building, operating, and following up on citizens' assemblies is a delicate process, every stage of which must be well thought through. If not, the likelihood of positive outcomes is much reduced. To paraphrase expert on democratic renewal Eva Rovers: Do it well or not at all.[8] It is also important to note that the citizens' assembly format is still relatively new, and the learning process is still ongoing.
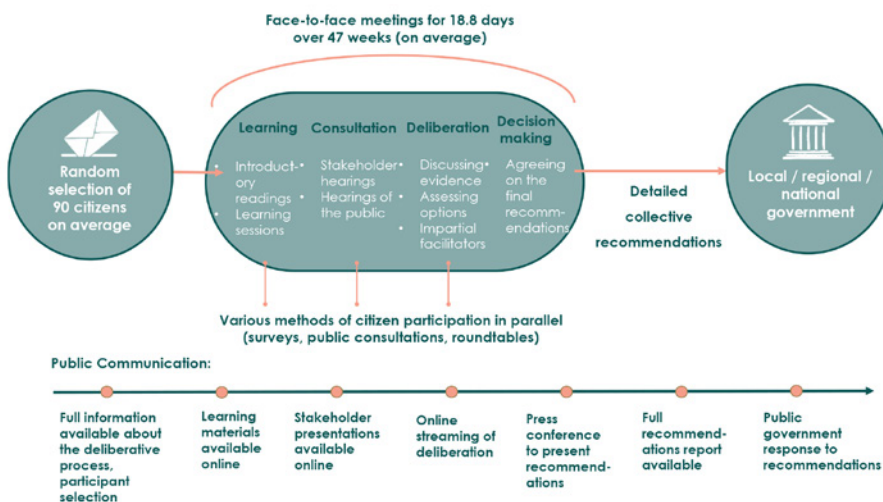
Source: Author's own creation based on data in the OECD Database of Representative Deliberative Processes and Institutions (2020).

Figure 2: Model of a citizens' assembly. Source: OECD (2020), *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*, p. 37.

Representation

A representative selection of citizens is achieved through weighted random sampling, through which it is ensured that the citizens selected represent the diversity of broader society. The characteristics used for selection often include gender, age, location, and educational level at a minimum, but additional characteristics can be included to correspond to the profile of particular areas. For example, in Brussels, where two languages are officially spoken, the participants' primary language was also taken into account, while in France, a special category was devised to ensure a representative selection of people living in urban and rural areas. And as Mostar in Bosnia and Herzegovina is primarily populated by people who belong to two ethnic groups, there ethnicity was also included as a selection category.

Members of the public are usually invited to participate in citizens' assemblies by means of letters sent to households or individuals. The addressees can indicate their desire to participate by replying to this letter and submitting the requested data. Weighted random selection is used to ensure the characteristics of those selected match those of the broader population.

In practice, however, extra measures are often needed to ensure the participation of harder-to-reach groups of citizens. It is important to consider the barriers they face in advance and prepare appropriate solutions to tackle them, for instance:

For some members of the public, financial issues constitute an obstacle to participation. Arrangements should therefore be made to provide assembly members with financial compensation for their participation.

Language can also be a barrier to participation, both in terms of reaching out and actual participation. Invitation letters sent in multiple languages or with a QR code

Deliberation sets itself apart from other forms of communication such as debating, negotiating, or conversing by emphasising mutual reasoning and reciprocity.

linking to a translation can help to overcome the former, while allowing participants to bring a "buddy" who can translate for them – who also receives remuneration for their participation – can help address the latter.

For parents, and single parents in particular, family commitments may make participation difficult. The provision of childcare can lower the barrier for them to take part.

Young people tend to be less inclined to participate in citizens' assemblies as the result of the worry that they do not know enough to make a worthwhile contribution. Special efforts can be made to assist them, for example arranging a facilitator to guide them during the process.

Invitation by letter only often fails to reach all groups within society. In-person invitations or follow-up information sessions once invitations have been distributed can help to ensure as broad a reach as possible.

Difficulties getting to, entering, or moving around within the meeting venue can also present an obstacle to participation. Assemblies should be held at locations that are easily reachable and accessible for all participants, including those without car transportation and that use wheelchairs.

High-quality and inclusive deliberation

Deliberation sets itself apart from other forms of communication such as debating, negotiating, or conversing by emphasising mutual reasoning and reciprocity. When deliberating, rather than coercing, manipulating, or deceiving, participants aim to persuade, striving to change judgments, preferences, and viewpoints. Participants in citizens' assemblies are informed at the beginning of the deliberative process that their role is to think beyond their own interests and

work together to develop recommendations that will benefit everyone in society.

To ensure high-quality deliberative processes, it is crucial that the central question neither be too specific nor too broad, and that participants are given enough time to consider and discuss the chosen topic. Good facilitation also plays a key role.

It is also important to recognise that the representative sample of citizens selected for a citizens' assembly will replicate the existing power relations in society. Certain groups of citizens will find it easier to speak and take up space, while others will find this more challenging. Minorities in society remain minorities within a citizens' assembly; it is important that that they feel respected and confident to share their opinions, and for their specific concerns and experiences to be taken into account. A good facilitator will create the conditions to ensure this. It is also of utmost importance to present the whole process in very transparent manner, from the sortition phase and decision on the central question(s) to debates and support to certain recommendations.

During the deliberative process, assembly participants receive inputs from a range of different actors. It is important that all of the various aspects of a topic are explored, and that the experts who address the group have enough time to do so. It is also necessary to strike a balance in the quantity of information provided: too little can hinder deep deliberation, while too much can be overwhelming and impede the development of creative contributions by participants.

Ideally, all citizens affected by a public policy decision should have an equal opportunity to provide input to collective decision-making to ensure that the decision is seen as legitimate. However, it is challenging to achieve a balance between political equality, deliberation, and mass participation, all

important principles. Often, institutions that strive for both political equality and mass participation, such as elections, fall short in terms of promoting deliberation. On the other hand, the ideal configuration that combines political equality and deliberation, represented by citizens' assemblies, struggles to foster mass participation due to the restriction to small groups for effective deliberation.

Similar to judges and jurors, citizens' assembly members are not directly accountable to the people they serve. Instead, they gain legitimacy from their position within the broader political landscape. As a result, these are able to deliberate without being constrained by the demands of specific constituencies or groups, allowing popular as well as unpopular and unfamiliar discourses to be represented and considered.

Impactful recommendations

A citizens' assembly can have various impacts. The most straightforward is that its recommendations are directly implemented as policy. To facilitate this, the question of implementation should be considered prior to the convening of the assembly. During the process of deliberation, participants should be given assistance and could be asked to focus on developing recommendations that are implementable. This is, of course, a fine balance. Participants should not be overly restricted in their deliberations, especially at the beginning of the process. The formulation of recommendations that are impossible to implement (whether practically or legally) is equally undesirable, however, as a lack of implementation can serve to erode trust in the citizens' assembly and in democratic processes more broadly.

Citizens' assemblies are often set up in such a way that the government is obliged to respond to their recommendations. If recommendations are rejected, an

Citizens' assemblies can also have an impact on their participants. There are many reports which say that interest of the topic of assembly has increased parallel to more information and knowledge.

explanation should be given, and similar alternatives should be considered.

A further option is to form a follow-up committee of randomly selected assembly participants to oversee the implementation of the recommendations. The advantage of permanent citizens' assemblies here is that such a committee can be designed in as a part of the whole cycle. Another advantage is that they allow the government to become more familiar with the concept and recognise the value of such a body. Every round offers the opportunity for mutual learning between the two parties. Yet, even in cases of non-permanent citizens assemblies such a committee can play an important role of oversight and monitoring, holding the government responsible and more transparent at least in the eyes of public. This is likely to result in a higher policy implementation rate.

Importantly, even if the recommendations developed by a citizens' assembly are rejected when they are first proposed, this does not prevent them from being taken up later – or by another government. A good example of this is the French national citizens' assembly on the climate (Convention citoyenne pour le climat). While French president Emmanuel Macron rejected almost all of its recommendations outright, some of these were nevertheless taken up at a later date. Recently, France banned short-haul flights and advertisements for fossil fuels, both recommendations of the assembly.

The theory surrounding citizens' assemblies has primarily emphasised how citizens' assemblies contribute to policymaking, but their influence on public discourse is also important. The Irish citizens' assemblies, which could be easily followed by the public via livestreams on national television and radio, managed to generate significant attention for and inform the public debate on contested topics such as abortion and

same-sex marriage, as illustrated by these testimonies:

"There was no trouble accessing the assembly findings as every time they met, the national TV channel, the newspapers and online-only news forums comprehensively reported the assembly's activities. Unless you chose to stick your head in the clouds, you could not avoid hearing or reading about the assembly."

"It felt very democratic. All sides were addressed. It very much helped me – not to decide as I already knew how I was voting, but to listen, understand and develop empathy for those who planned to vote the other way. The issue was a very complex and divisive one, and the Citizens' Assembly helped the issue be seen from all sides."[9]

The 2016-2018 Irish citizens' assembly resulted in a referendum [on the regulation of termination of pregnancy, held on 25 May 2018] that is likely to have been based on better-informed decisions, or at the very least, decisions based on more deliberation. However, this is quite exceptional. It is often difficult to attract public attention to what is happening in citizens' assemblies. As a result, their recommendations may be seen as coming "out of the blue" and therefore enjoy less legitimacy. Educating citizens on the value of citizens' assemblies can help to overcome this challenge.

Citizens' assemblies can also have an impact on their participants. There are many reports which say that interest of the topic of assembly has increased parallel to more information and knowledge. Similarly, participants are inclined to transform their personal and family lives according to their concerns. Furthermore, in many cases, their interest for the work of citizen assemblies maintains or even increases.[10] Also there are many reports about beneficial impacts on citizen assembly on individual values and behaviour.

''In a well-run assembly, people flourish. They understand the values of respect, dignity, productive collaboration, community, purpose and an overall sense of belonging. Cultivating the democratic capabilities within our system is the core of a deliberative process. As such, the principles that underpin a citizens' assembly are the core of solving the current issues within our democratic system.''[11]

Core principles of citizens' assemblies

Citizens' assemblies are a specific practical application of deliberative democracy. Their main goal is to reach a consensus on the issue at hand. This process must be pluralistic, ensure equality, and be built on the foundation of reasoned debate. Only then can we maximize their democratic legitimacy and influence.

Consensus-building

The goal in deliberative democracy is not for any one person or group to "win" an argument, but to work together towards a decision that reflects the common wisdom of the participants. It stands in contrast to representative democracy, where positions are often set, and the majority opinion rules. Citizens' assemblies attempt to achieve a collective decision-making process that accommodates diverse views. Instead of an aggregation of votes, it is an aggregation of perspectives.

A consensus can deliver better results than a majority decision because it is based on a more thorough exploration and thus a deeper understanding of the topic in question. Furthermore, the fact that the resulting decision is not a reflection of the most popular opinion but rather a product of inclusive and careful deliberation also increases democratic legitimacy.

A consensus can deliver better results than a majority decision because it is based on a more thorough exploration and thus a deeper understanding of the topic in question.

Decisions that are reached through consensus are also more sustainable in the long term. As they have more widespread support and represent a more collective understanding of the issue, they are less likely to be contested in the future.

Pluralism

In a truly deliberative process, every person taking part is given the opportunity to speak, listen, and have an influence on the final outcome, including those from marginalised or underrepresented communities.

This allows for a wide range of perspectives and experiences to be considered during the process. In this way, more people will feel that their views have been taken into consideration, and decisions better reflect the entire population instead of the few. This increases the legitimacy of the entire process and its outcomes. Moreover, if it is understood that a process seriously considered a wide range of perspectives, the acceptance of decisions, even among those who do not agree with the outcome, will most likely be increased. Lastly, a more diverse selection of views can result in a more comprehensive understanding of an issue and more innovative solutions.

Equality

Within deliberative democratic processes, all voices – regardless of background or the way a person presents themselves – should be treated with equal respect and given equal consideration. This is fundamental for creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and one in which diverse ideas can be freely exchanged. This is also a prerequisite for the practice of building a consensus. And while building a consensus is the goal, votes may be cast. In this case, the votes of each participant must have equal weight.

Not everyone has the same opportunity to take part in a citizens' assembly. When organising an assembly, the obstacles posed by differences in social and economic backgrounds should be taken into consideration in order to make access truly equal.

Another important element of the functioning of citizens' assemblies is input from experts. Access to this information must be equal among participants. This means both access to the information itself and that the information provided should be presented in a clear and understandable manner. Different levels of understanding must be accommodated.

Not everyone has the same opportunity to take part in a citizens' assembly. When organising an assembly, the obstacles posed by differences in social and economic backgrounds should be taken into consideration in order to make access truly equal. As already mentioned, this may require accommodating people with families, disabilities, or differences in abilities. Measures such as compensating people for their time and scheduling assembly meetings in such a way that more people are able to attend should be given consideration.

Deliberation and reasoned debate

It is self-evident that deliberation is a central aspect of deliberative democracy. The process of deliberation and the practice of reasoned debate is the mechanism through which the values of pluralism, equality, transparency, and consensus-building are operationalised.

Deliberation requires participants to consider a range of viewpoints, understand the reasoning of others, and articulate their own perspectives. Participants exchange reasons in an effort to persuade rather than coerce, manipulate, or deceive, aiming to change judgments, preferences, and viewpoints.

Engaging in deliberation before making decisions offers numerous advantages:

- Deliberative processes create an environment of learning and discussion, thus enhancing the knowledge basis for decision-making: by exchanging arguments, participants can expand their perspectives, comprehend the reasoning behind others' opinions, and identify potential weaknesses or biases. This leads to the formation of well-informed recommendations, which are more valuable for policymakers and decision-makers.
- Through emphasis on evidence, logic, and ethical considerations, reasoned debate may lead to decisions that are better able to stand up to scrutiny.
- Deliberation can promote mutual understanding and empathy, even among those who strongly disagree. If the setting is not adversarial, and shared interests or values can be identified, polarisation can be reduced.
- Deliberative processes aid policymakers in gaining a better understanding of public priorities, as well as the values and rationales underlying them, while also identifying areas where consensus is feasible and where it is not. Evidence suggests that they are particularly useful in situations where there is a need to overcome political deadlock and weigh trade-offs.
- By involving citizens in public decision-making, deliberation strengthens public trust in government and democratic institutions. People are more likely to trust a decision that has been influenced by ordinary people than one made solely by government.

Public influence

The aim of citizens' assemblies is to influence the public sphere through their deliberations. This impact can manifest in various ways, including changes to public opinion or the shaping of policies. To date, the primary emphasis of the theory on deliberative democracy has been the contribution to policymaking made by citizens' assemblies. Specifically, it has explored how their recommendations assist policymakers in

making more knowledgeable and responsive choices. The underlying rationale for aiming to influence policymaking is the desire for the outcomes of citizens' assembly deliberations to be reflected in public decisions. Yet, their public influence goes much further. When its functioning and recommendations are communicated properly and with a high degree of transparency, the citizens' assembly becomes a political entity on its own. Although of limited duration, such a collective decision-making body can also improve public awareness and change public opinion around a central issue.[12]

Endnotes

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10   https://www.knoca.eu/news/the-long-term-impact-of-participation-in-climate-assemblies-evidence-from-the-uk

11   Testimony of a practitioner, https://www.g1000.org/sites/default/files/2022-10/KNOCA_Key_Drivers_of_Impact_Rovers-Fide.pdf.

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Case
Studies

Overview

The following case studies explore the conception, functioning, and experiences of citizens' assemblies in five different European locations: the city of Milan (Italy), Ireland, the city of Brussels (Belgium), the city of Valjevo (Serbia), and the region of Catalonia (Spain). They were developed on the basis of interviews with key protagonists and are structured around the following headings: context; topic; organisational structure; participant selection; working methodology; developing expertise; working groups; deliberative process; final report; institutional response; communications and media coverage; and feedback, lessons learned and future initiatives.

Although the number of citizen assemblies on issues relevant for the European Green Deal has been quite high in the period of our project, we aimed for a geographically, culturally and politically diverse landscape, with different levels (local/regional/national) and various topics. The five examples do not aim to present best practices – regardless of their quality – but to share the diverse experiences within which citizens' assemblies operate, how they develop and how their work is perceived in the local context. More importantly, these short and structured insights are here not to provide finite answers, but to increase your curiosity and motivate readers to learn even more about the differentiated picture of citizens' assemblies, thus increasing the room for democratic innovation beyond old or new canons.

Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate of Milan[1]

Milan, Italy: 2022 – 2030

by Vedran Horvat, Director of the Institute for Political Ecology

Context and topic

The municipality of Milan's climate assembly (Assemblea Permanente dei Cittadini sul Clima di Milano) grew out of collaboration between the city's municipal environment directorate and its citizen participation directorate.

The assembly is embedded in the city's Air and Climate Plan (Piano Aria e Clima, PAC). The PAC aims to decarbonise the city of Milan by 2050 via a package of 49 concrete actions designed to fight climate change and enhance adaptation and mitigation policies. In addition to stakeholder involvement, citizen engagement throughout the policy cycle – from design to governance, implementation, and monitoring – is considered essential to the success of the PAC, with section 5 of the plan dedicated to this.

Included in section 5 is a specific reference to the creation of a citizens' assembly (action 5.1.4). The assembly is one of a set of communications, awareness-raising, and participation initiatives – known as Milano Cambia Aria ("Milan gets a change of air") – that relate to the PAC's different areas of action. The aim of the assembly is to involve Milan's citizens in the governance of the plan, with a specific focus on allowing the

perspectives of different target groups – in particular minority groups – to be taken into account in policymaking.

The Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate of Milan was approved in February 2022 following a civic consultation phase related both to the PAC and the assembly. A "citizens' table" (*tavolo dei cittadini*) was organised in 2020-21, both to finalise the content of the PAC and to test the participatory methodology chosen for the implementation of the assembly. Once this testing phase was completed and the necessary improvements made to the assembly feasibility plan, the participant selection process was finalised (see later section).

In particular, the assembly works on the strategic implementation, monitoring, and detailed evaluation of the PAC, while striving for the inclusion of a maximum diversity of voices. From 2025 onwards, the assembly's deliberations and proposals will serve to inform the revision of the PAC by the municipality. The assembly is considered to be "permanent" because it accompanies, without interruption, the entire lifespan of the PAC until 2030.

Organisational structure

The assembly is built around a rotational mechanism, where different groups of selected participants enter and leave at set intervals. This structure was chosen in particular to ensure the "permanent" nature of the citizens' assembly, while facilitating knowledge transfer from one group to the next. All members are asked to sign a participatory pact and accept a set of common guidelines before starting their 6-month term. Every year, a total of 180 citizens participate in the assembly.

Participant selection

For the initial composition of the assembly for the year 2022-2023, 10,000 members of the public were randomly selected by the city's municipal statistics office. The municipality sent these individuals personally addressed letters and emails inviting them to participate. Of these, 700 people responded indicating their immediate availability. They also provided personal details via a short survey that featured questions on age, gender, area of residence, nationality, educational level, and occupational status. The decision was taken not to collect data under categories such as sexual orientation or political beliefs to avoid an infringement of privacy, even if such information was deemed relevant.

Of this group of 700, 180 people were selected to participate in the assembly. They were then divided into four groups of 45 people, with a new group joining the assembly every three months. The first group of 45 people entered the assembly in December 2022; they were joined by a second group in March 2023, making up the final composition of 90 members.[2] At the end of May 2023, those participants that joined the assembly in December left after six months of participation. The final group of 45 people

For the purpose of these case studies, the terms "participant" and "member", used to define an individual who participates in a citizens' assembly, are used interchangeably.

then joined the assembly in November 2023. This rolling system allows each new group to be welcomed and inducted by a "veteran" of the assembly.

Working methodology

Each member of the public who agrees to participate signs a "participatory pact" to formally join the assembly for six months: this requires their attendance at four plenary sessions. Members are compensated for their participation with seven free tickets to Milan's museums, art galleries, sports centres, etc.

Assembly participants are also invited to join a thematic working group. Working groups are designed to help them work on the 49 concrete actions foreseen under the PAC between plenary sessions with the help of municipal experts and facilitators, resulting in revisions or the development of alternative solutions. Time is always taken at the beginning of working group sessions to welcome new members.

During each plenary session, facilitators support the working groups in developing proposals on specific topics. Municipal experts are also present to give feedback and answer technical questions. Later in the day, each working group updates the others on their focus issue, the discussions conducted, and the conclusions reached.

Developing expertise

All new participants are given trainings on:

- the functioning of the assembly
- the goals, main thematic areas, and initiatives of Milan's Air and Climate Plan
- the basic principles of climate change.

With regard to the latter, when entering the assembly, each participant is provided with

a list of accessible educational materials, provided in the form of videos and podcasts, on ten main topics connected to climate change. This is made publicly available on the Milano Cambia Aria website and via an interactive whiteboard[3] for the exclusive use of assembly participants.

These materials have been collated by assembly staff in order to ensure a common understanding of the key issues relating to the environmental crisis and a range of possible solutions. Organisers planned to request feedback from the assembly participants on these materials with a view to gauging their effectiveness.

Working groups

As mentioned above, the Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate comprises a number of working groups in order to give its members a more intimate discussion space in which to formulate new ideas and proposals on the Air and Climate Plan (PAC). Participants are free to choose the working group they would like to join.

Each working group is assigned a specific topic (for instance the circular economy or air quality) drawn from the 49 actions foreseen under the PAC and selected by assembly staff and experts on the basis of their suitability for discussion. New topics are either progressively added or replace those that have been concluded.

Working groups meet between plenary sessions, according to the frequency and modalities decided by the participants themselves. Each group has one or more coordinators with a particular responsibility to communicate with assembly staff. After each meeting, a brief report on the content of the discissions is sent by the coordinator(s) to the working group's facilitators and one or more municipal experts assigned to the group. Working groups can also ask the

[The assembly] comprises a number of working groups in order to give its members a more intimate discussion space.

advice of facilitators on issues relating to meeting organisation and the management of relationships between group participants.

Activities carried out within the working groups include:

- Compilation of questions on a specific aspect of the PAC to be addressed to experts and technicians employed by the municipality, public agencies, and the PAC scientific technical committee, as well as exploration/analysis of the responses to these questions
- Compilation of comments and observations on the PAC
- Familiarisation with the PAC and the themes of the working group
- Development of ideas, suggestions, revisions, or additions in relation to the PAC, certain actions foreseen within the plan, or specific topics covered by the working group
- Development of original proposals for the concrete implementation of certain specific PAC actions, using a template provided by assembly staff if desired, which the assembly will vote on at the end of the process
- Collection of best practice and information on the state of play as well as details of bodies, associations, and stakeholders who could get involved in the implementation of the PAC
- Organisation of initiatives related to the PAC to be implemented locally, as well as meetings and exchanges with other working groups
- Development of communications strategies to raise awareness of the activities of the assembly among the general public
- Participation in events on the topics covered by the PAC in order to gather new ideas and information.

Deliberative process

As already explained, a group of 45 members leaves the assembly after six months of participation on a rolling basis. During their last plenary session, the entire assembly is called to vote on any working group proposals that are sufficiently finalised to be discussed by the whole assembly.

The deliberative process is twofold. Each proposal is presented to the assembly and expressions of agreement, objections, and suggestions are compiled. Subsequently, efforts are made to build the highest possible level of consensus among assembly members.

The process of deliberation includes:

- The presentation of each group's proposals to the assembly by both members and experts
- Q&A sessions within the plenary on the proposals to provide any necessary clarification, with expert support
- Discussions at working-group-level aimed at developing observations, objections, and suggestions on the other groups' proposals
- The integration of this feedback into the original proposals and the drafting of revised versions designed to meet with fewer objections
- The presentation of the updated proposals to the plenary by each working group
- The compilation of further objections to and observations on the updated proposals
- The final voting session.

In line with the city of Milan's guidelines for citizen participation, the assembly approves proposals by a full majority (50 per cent +1) of those members who are present at the voting session. Participants vote on proposals by means of a voting card, which allows them to

express their simple assent or disagreement. The approved proposals are included in the assembly's annual report to the municipal administration (report annuale dei lavori), with clear indications on the specific percentage of consensus gathered by each proposal. The annual report also includes a statement on participants' objections, amendments, and observations and whether these contributed to the approval or rejection of specific proposals.

Final report

The assembly produces an annual report to the municipal administration containing its proposals for submission (*report annuale dei lavori*). The first annual report was produced in December 2023.[4]

Institutional response

The municipality of Milan is obliged to acknowledge receipt of the annual report of the assembly and must send a detailed reply (*dossier di risposta al report annuale dei lavori*) within two months that states whether or not – and to what extent – the assembly's proposals will be integrated into the PAC. These responses are published online and also integrated into the annual reports.[5]

Communications and media coverage

As the objective of the Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate is to represent the voice of the entire city of Milan, its organisers are very conscious of the need for good communications surrounding the initiative in order for it to gain civic legitimation and foster public interest in its results.

The launch of the assembly was communicated in various different ways:

- In-person presentations to a range of associations (above all those working

on environmental issues or citizen participation)
- A visible presence at public events, such as the municipality's annual Green Week and Fa' la cosa giusta! (Do the Right Thing), a festival held every year in Milan on sustainable lifestyles and critical consumption
- Above-the-line communications in public spaces, such as libraries
- Online communications via the municipality's newsletter and social networks
- The live broadcasting of an assembly session on the Milano Cambia Aria website and the Milano Partecipa platform.

All of the reports produced by the plenary, in addition to information on the process and work of the assembly, are available on Milano Partecipa's publicly accessible Decidim platform (a digital platform for citizen participation).[6]

Feedback, lessons learned and future initiatives

At the first meeting of the assembly in December 2022, feedback and suggestions for improvement relating to the functioning of the assembly were collected from participants. In next rounds, feedback based on participants' "lived experience" of the assembly has been repeated – on their general experience but in particular on the effectiveness of the process (including the deliberative procedure), the materials, and the training provided – to understand what needs to be improved for future participants.

Furthermore, a formal procedure has been put in place to involve local associations and partners in the activities of the assembly. A number of associations – including the Italian National Association of Service Centres for Volunteering (Centri di Servizio per il Volontariato, CSV), ActionAid, and the Italian

Observatory on Civic Assembly (Osservatorio Italiano delle Assemblee Cittadine) – have requested the municipality's authorisation to study the assembly with a view to preparing a formal evaluation and proposing possible improvements. With time, more associations working on environmental and climate issues or participation and democracy are likely to develop a specific role in relation to the development of the assembly. Together, these organisations represent the first circle of assembly stakeholders.

Interestingly, many assembly participants have remained personally interested in fighting climate change, even after the conclusion of their formal participation. To channel this enthusiasm, assembly staff are developing a volunteer programme, including the nomination of climate ambassadors. The aim here is to make it possible for members of the public to get involved in initiatives and proposals emerging from the assembly itself. This opportunity will be presented just before the final plenary session of the outgoing group.

Endnotes

1   Sources on the APCC include: https://partecipazione.comune.milano.it/processes/ assemblea-permanente-dei-cittadini-sul-clima and https://www.comune.milano.it//web/milano-cambia-aria/come-posso-partecipare/sono-un-cittadino/assemblea-permanente-dei-cittadini-sul-clima.

2   For the purpose of these case studies, the terms "participant" and "member", used to define an individual who participates in a citizens' assembly, are used interchangeably.

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5   https://www.poliedra.polimi.it/en/project/milan-permanent-citizens-assembly-on-climate/

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Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss
Ireland: October and November 2022

by Lana Pukanić, Institute for Political Ecology

Context

Ireland, which has to date organised six citizens' assemblies, has established itself as a forerunner in European deliberative democracy. Assemblies are proposed by the Irish government and, following debate in the Dáil Éireann (lower house) and Seanad Éireann (senate), are formally established by the Oireachtas (parliament). Once established, the assemblies operate independently. Perhaps the most famous of the Irish assemblies was the 2016-2018 citizens' assembly, which laid the groundwork for the successful referendum to repeal the country's near-total ban on abortion.

In February 2022, the establishment of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss was approved, with the aim of deliberating and making recommendations on "how the State can improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss".

Around the same time, the academic community in Ireland was approached by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (on the initiative of Malcolm Noonan T.D., Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform), which is responsible for issues of nature and biodiversity, to create a research consortium that would design and run a Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, the first of its kind in Ireland. The consortium, when formed, was led by Dublin City University (DCU) and involved University College Cork (UCC) and terre des hommes (tdh), an organisation working on children's environmental rights.

While the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss provided the impetus for establishing the assembly for children and young people, the two assemblies were commissioned by different parts of government and held separately.

Topic

It was no accident that the first children and young people's assembly deliberated on biodiversity loss. According to project lead Diarmuid Torney, it was the view of the ministry that "Young people should arguably have a say in all policy areas, but particularly for something like environmental policy and biodiversity," as it will profoundly affect their future and that of future generations. The usual lower cut-off point for citizens' assemblies in Ireland

is 18, the voting age, which they believed left out an important part of the population. The assembly therefore involved children and young people aged from seven to 17.

"All over the world, children and young people themselves are demanding to be included in decision-making that will protect nature, the environment and their future. This generation may well be the last with the opportunity to reverse the damage that has been done to the natural world and restore balance to our ecosystems," states the assembly's final report.

The report also declares that the assembly's goal was "meaningfully realising children and young people's participation rights and creating a space for intergenerational dialogue on how Ireland will protect its biodiversity".

Organisational structure

The consortium believed it was essential for the process to have an intergenerational project team, comprising not only adults (including leading experts in the fields of environmental governance and deliberative democracy; children's rights, participation, and education studies; and biodiversity and nature), but also children and young people. This helped ensure the assembly was designed in a way children and young people would find engaging.

In May 2022, children and young people across Ireland were invited to apply to be a Young Advisor, based on their passion and interest in nature and biodiversity. In June 2022, nine Young Advisors aged 8–16 joined the team and met with the adults twice a month to co-design the assembly. They were also involved during the two assembly weekends.

It was the youngest Young Advisor who convinced the team to bring down the lower

cut-off age from eight to seven, which she believed was an appropriate younger age. As such, the final age range was seven to 17.

Participant selection

Torney notes that the problem the team immediately needed to tackle was that typical ways of reaching adults are not (as) effective for reaching children. For example, an often-used recruitment method involves calling randomly generated phone numbers, but not all children have phones. Another is sending invitations to randomly generated addresses, but not all households have children. Professional polling companies, often used in Ireland, only work with adults. There was also significant time pressure, as only two weeks were allocated for the recruitment process.

Following much discussion over the summer of 2022, the project team decided to treat schools as households. There are around 4,000 schools in Ireland, and the team generated a stratified random sample of 5 per cent of schools using certain diversity criteria (e.g. gender segregation and geography). The team then designed an invitation pack and emailed it to these schools, with the expectation that they would share this invitation with their entire student body. Any student was then welcome to put their name forward. The process was launched the week the schools returned from the summer holidays. One week in, the team had received a total of seven expressions of interest; they had been expecting hundreds. It was clear, says Torney, that their best effort at replicating a process that had been run for adults "had spectacularly failed".

The team quickly changed strategy and spread the word in any way they could, using paid ads on social media and circulating the information through a number of different networks. In the end, there were 510 valid expressions of interest. The team captured six
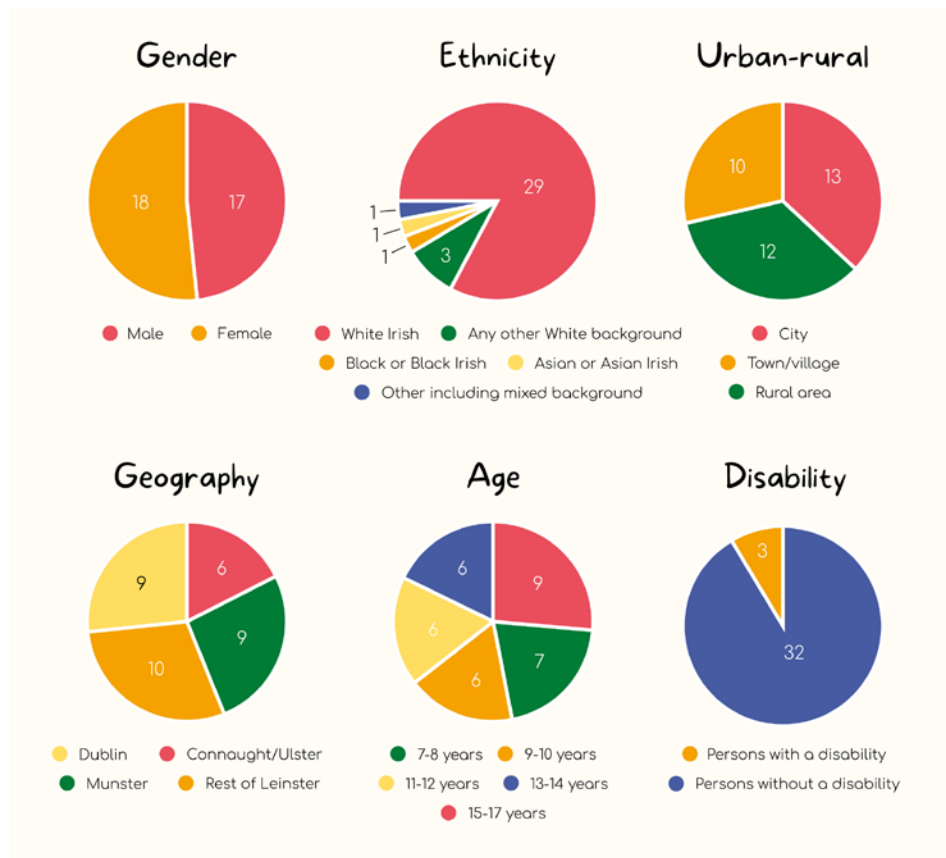
Figure 3. Overview of participant demographics. Source: Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss Final Report.

pieces of demographic information – gender, ethnicity, urban/rural location, geography, age, and disability – from these applications. They then used the 2016 census data, looking at the population under 18, to establish what the total-population proportions for these six characteristics would be and employed a computer algorithm to select a random sample of 35 applicants, stratified by these six characteristics (see Figure 3).

Working methodology

The assembly took place over two weekends in October and November 2022. Besides the two meetings, members were asked to carry out their own independent investigations using materials created by the project team.

The first weekend (8-9 October 2022) was dedicated to the members getting to know each other and learning about children's rights, deliberative democracy, and biodiversity loss. It was divided into four sessions. The first session, "What are Children's Rights?", "supported Assembly members to explore the connection between children's rights, biodiversity, and participating in decision-making processes" and used discussion methods developed with the Young Advisors.

The second session, "What is Biodiversity Loss?", asked the members to describe what biodiversity meant to them. They then discussed various connections between the human and the natural world. The third session involved an outdoor activity in which

the members interacted with nature and each other through a guided walk and scavenger hunt – a particularly popular session. In the final session, "What are the Five Drivers of Biodiversity Loss?", the participants were divided into five thematic groups. Each had the task of exploring their assigned driver, guided by project team facilitators, and were advised to look at both problems and solutions.

The second weekend (22-23 October 2022) was devoted to assembly members engaging in dialogue on what they had learned so far and developing their collective vision, key messages, and calls to action, which they presented on the final morning to Minister Malcolm Noonan. The first session of the weekend, "What Does Biodiversity Loss Mean to Different People?", drew from methodologies such as participatory theatre and role-play to encourage assembly members to consider different perspectives on the issue. Session two, "What Are Laws and Policies, and How Can We Influence Change?", introduced the participants to Ireland's legal and policy context, including different types of biodiversity-related policies. The third session was an overview of the work of the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss. In the final session, the thematic groups worked together to create over a hundred calls to action.

Developing expertise

One of the team's concerns was how the process would be viewed from the outside; would it be attacked for not having a sufficient diversity of views? That is why the "What Does Biodiversity Loss Mean to Different People?" session was especially important. The role-play exercise had members play out the scenario of a medium-sized town where there are proposals to build a new housing estate. They were divided into groups, and each person had a different role and perspective – a farmer, a developer, an environmentalist, a child, etc. In this way, the team not only exposed members to a

It was the youngest Young Advisor who convinced the team to bring down the lower cut-off age from eight to seven, which she believed was an appropriate younger age. As such, the final age range was seven to 17.

variety of opinions but also got them to think about why different people have such different views.

Working groups

The 35 members were divided in two ways – by age, known as "family groups", and by topic, known as "theme groups".

The members shared their family group with others who were approximately the same age. According to the final report, "The purpose of Family Groups was to enable the children and young people to connect with others of the same age and receive age-appropriate wellbeing support throughout the Assembly process." The members started each day in their family group and then separated into five theme groups, which were made up of participants across the age spectrum. At the end of the day, they returned to their family group and could share what they had learned in their theme groups.

Each of the five theme groups specialised in one of the key drivers of biodiversity loss: habitat loss, climate change, invasive species, overexploitation, and pollution. Members were divided into these groups so they would not be too overwhelmed by the vastness of the topic in such a short amount of time.

A range of different activities was offered during the two weekends, with the older participants given some additional tasks. The members were encouraged to express themselves in different ways: while the older members were writing articulate visions of the future, the younger ones also used plasticine to play and create their visions.

Deliberative process

In order to help the members develop recommendations, the team created a framework on how to do so, including posters featuring various questions on the issue to suggest different approaches to the members.

While adult citizens' assemblies ordinarily end with a voting process, there were concerns that this could become "a popularity contest". As such, the project team ended up "basically capturing everything" the members said. The result was 58 recommendations or calls to action, which were mostly unfiltered ideas gathered from assembly members on the Saturday afternoon of the second weekend.

The project team then worked with the members to crystallise the key messages of the assembly and write a vision statement. The vision statement and the six key messages were captured from ideas contributed by all participants.

On the final morning of the assembly, the project team presented drafts of the vision statement, key messages, and calls to action to the assembly members, who then had time to "revise, refine and agree on the values-based ideas and the final text" in a version of the consensus process.

The key message that was most popular with participants was "We must treat the Earth like a family member or a friend."

Final report

In 2023, the final report of the assembly – written by Valery Molay, Katie Reid, and Diarmuid Torney with contributions from the wider project team – was published, describing the process and the journey of the team and members, and including the vision, key messages, and calls to action. It is available online.[1]

Institutional response

In the original concept for the assembly, the project team identified three pathways to impact: (i) dialogue with the adult

Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, (ii) through the minister and his officials, and (iii) through the parliament. Ireland has a distinctive mechanism under which a special parliamentary committee is tasked with considering the recommendations of citizens' assemblies, hearing from a wider range of stakeholders and then issuing its report and recommendations.

The first pathway included six members of the assembly presenting their experiences to the Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss in November 2022, with the adult assembly also watching a video on the children and young people's assembly. In its own final report, the adult citizens' assembly included this overarching recommendation: "The State is urged to take into account the recommendations from the Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, an initiative featuring our next generation, and continue to engage with children and young people on the environment."[2]

With regard to the second pathway, Minister Malcolm Noonan, as the project's initiator, was supportive of the assembly throughout its work and also afterwards, joining the members and the team at their one-year reunion to report back on how he had taken their recommendations into account. The National Biodiversity Action Plan, published in January 2024, contains various commitments that reflect the recommendations of the children and young people's assembly. These include the call to establish a permanent children and young people's assembly – the Children and Young People's Biodiversity Forum – to ensure that the assembly's recommendations are implemented and not simply forgotten.

The third pathway was the parliamentary committee, which met in autumn 2023 over several months, primarily to consider the recommendations of the adult citizens' assembly. In November 2023, six members of the children and young people's assembly

came before the committee. Diarmuid Torney believes it was the first time that a parliamentary committee had invited children or young people to address it. In December 2023, the committee published its recommendations in a parliamentary report. It included further endorsement of the calls to action developed by the children and young people's assembly and noted that the overarching recommendation by the adult Citizens' Assembly was: "In progress – NBAP (National Biodiversity Action Plan and Protected Sites) proposes action for NPWS (National Parks and Wildlife Service) to support establishment of Youth Biodiversity Forum."[3]

Communications and media coverage

The children and young people's assembly received a relatively good level of newspaper coverage over a sustained period, with reports appearing on the assembly, its final report, and the parliamentary committee. An additional unanticipated impact was at a local level: a number of assembly members were interviewed by newspapers in their communities or undertook other awareness-raising activities. Two years later, media interest in the assembly continues.

Feedback, lessons learned and future initiatives

Despite the various challenges faced by the project team when running the first children and young people's assembly in Ireland, the assembly proved to be a major learning experience and succeeded in most of what it set out to do. Perhaps most importantly, the focus groups held at the one-year reunion revealed that the participating children and young people had increased confidence in their own power and agency as a result of taking part in the assembly.

Endnotes

1   Children and Young People's Assembly on
     Biodiversity Loss Final Report,
     https://cyp-biodiversity.ie/?r3d=final-report.

2   Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss Final
     Report, March 2023,
     https://citizensassembly.ie/previous-assemblies/
     citizens-assembly-on-biodiversity-loss/.

3   Joint Committee on Environment and
     Climate Action: «Report on the examination of
     recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly report
     on biodiversity loss», December 2023

Brussels Citizens' Assembly on Climate[1]
Brussels, Belgium: 2023 – ongoing

by Elze Vermaas, Oikos

Context

As a country, Belgium has significant experience with deliberative democracy. In 2011, the process of forming a government took an exceptionally long time. In response, a manifesto was presented by 27 members of the public with a simple idea: to bring together 1,000 randomly selected individuals to reflect on and draft recommendations for policymakers. It was a decision-making group similar to the G20, but with 1,000 members. Thus, the G1000 was born.

In 2019, the parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium, also known as East Belgium (Ostbelgien), passed a decree establishing the world's first permanent citizens' assembly. The framework for this Bürgerdialog in Ostbelgien was designed by G1000, which has since become a platform for democratic renewal in Belgium.

Also in 2019, the newly elected government of the Brussels-Capital Region announced plans to initiate a public debate with Brussels' citizens, as well as economic, social, and institutional actors, transition initiatives, and local authorities, centred around a low-carbon vision for the city by 2050. This initiative was also built into climate

law (Code Bruxellois de l'Air, du Climat et de la maîtrise de l'Energie, CoBrACE / Brussels Wetboek voor Lucht, Klimaat en Energiebeheersing, BWLKE). As a result, the Brussels Citizens' Assembly on Climate (Assemblée citoyenne pour le climat / Burgerraad voor het klimaat) was formed a few years later in 2023. This assembly is permanent and meets annually, each time with a new group of participants. The continuity of the process allows members from one cycle to pass on knowledge to those in the next cycle, as well as enabling longer-term follow-up on policy development and the scrutiny of government action.

The citizens' assembly had been formally introduced by the Brussels-Capital Region in 2022, in the context of the "crises of unprecedented magnitude" that had taken place:

"[...] [T]he Covid-19 pandemic, which is challenging our lifestyles, the dramatic floods in the summer of 2021 in Wallonia, and the war in Ukraine, which highlights our dependence on fossil fuels. We are also experiencing an unprecedented series of climatic events in Brussels: repeated heat waves, loss of biodiversity and unprecedented

increases in gas, fuel and electricity prices. [...] The goal? To achieve carbon neutrality, with interim targets in 2030 and 2040. Today we are already taking action: compared to 2005, emissions are already down 21% by 2021. We must now accelerate the pace for reducing emissions to meet the carbon neutrality target in 27 years."[2]

The statement also referred to the importance of citizen participation:

"Why a Citizens' Assembly on Climate? The Region wants to find ways to strengthen measures to enable the goal of carbon neutrality to be reached by 2050. However, there is a limit on the conditions and price to achieve it. For example, the measures should not be studied only in a technical way, by experts. The Region also wants the measures to lead to better living conditions for the inhabitants of Brussels and to be defined together with all inhabitants. This is why the Region has decided to create a permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate. A process that will be repeated every year, to work on new topics defined by the Assembly members, linked to the theme of climate change."[3]

Topic

Both the impact of the assembly's reco-mmendations and the representativeness of the group itself are strongly influenced by the topic and framing questions selected for deliberation. In order to attract more than a narrow group of people to participate, the content focus should be sufficiently broad and should also translate into implementable recommendations. And to ensure the latter, it should be developed in collaboration with the actors who will be responsible for political follow-up on the assembly's work.

In order to ensure that participants know what is expected of them, and, in turn, what they can expect from the assembly, it is also important that its mandate and the nature of

the political follow-up – what will or will not happen at the end of the process in relation to its recommendations – be clearly defined in advance.

This developmental phase takes time, but it is a worthwhile investment: the clearer the mandate, topic, framing questions, and expected follow-up, the smoother the rest of the process will be. And above all, the more satisfied the participants, as well as those political actors responsible for dealing with the assembly's recommendations.

The theme of the first citizens' assembly in 2023 was exceptionally chosen by the government. Since then, assembly topics have been chosen by a group of 25 members of the public randomly selected from the previous assembly. This allows participants to pass the baton between assemblies, ensuring the transmission of knowledge and the continuity of the initiative.

The first cycle, which is the focus of this case study, was centred on the following questions: How can we live in Brussels to meet climate challenges by 2050? And what measures should be taken to ensure that the living environment can be of good quality, affordable, and respectful of the environment, and that everyone can live in it with dignity?

The second cycle focused on the theme of food, chosen by the citizens themselves. It asked: How do we ensure that all Brussels residents can switch to a more sustainable and quality food system by 2050? What do you as Brussels residents need in order to change the food system of tomorrow? What do you expect from the government, the private sector and society in general to help you do this?

The third cycle started in February 2025, and tackles the place citizens wish to give to sharing and cooperation in our modes

of consumption and production in Brussels between now and 2050.

Organisational structure

As previously mentioned, the citizens' assembly was established by the government of the Brussels-Capital Region. The coordinator of the assembly is employed within the government administration. While there is no political influence exerted during the process, it has proven beneficial for the coordinator to be in close contact with government experts throughout the process. Among other benefits, this ensures that the recommendations developed by the assembly have not already been proposed or implemented. Participants are informed about existing initiatives throughout the process, helping to ensure that their work is relevant and has implementation potential.

A steering committee is in place that is responsible for maintaining the quality of the process over the long term, populated by experts on inclusion, climate issues, and democratic participation. The committee evaluates the success of the assembly in these areas, as well as the democratic quality of the process.

More broadly, working alongside advisory councils and independent committees, the assembly ensures that members of the public are able to play a role in influencing Brussels' climate governance.

Participant selection

Ten thousand invitation letters were sent to addresses randomly selected from an open-access address database. The response rate for the first stage of recruitment was close to 3 per cent.

Following this initial draw, 100 people were selected from the 297 members of the public who had expressed an interest

While there is no political influence exerted during the process, it has proven beneficial for the coordinator to be in close contact with government experts throughout the process.

in participating in the assembly, bearing in mind specific quotas for each of the following criteria: gender, age, place of residence, linguistic background, and socio-economic index. In this way, the assembly aimed to reflect the diversity of the population of the Brussels-Capital Region. These 100 people were invited to take part in the Citizens' Climate Assembly.

Regrettably, the representativeness of this initial assembly was thrown out of balance due to 16 participants dropping out between the selection process and the start of the assembly and a further seven leaving partway through. While precise figures cannot be provided (partly due to the use of different indicators), the impression of the organisers was that people under the age of 25 and those with a lower socio-economic status (particularly those with lower levels of education) were underrepresented, as were ethnic and/or linguistic minorities and those less engaged with climate issues. By contrast, the over-50s and those with a higher socio-economic status (especially those with higher levels of education) were overrepresented. These imbalances had been present following the first stage of selection but were largely corrected in the second round.

Working methodology

The working methodology of the assembly was developed by G1000. To this end, it organised a multi-day design meeting with representatives of various Brussels administrations and national and international democracy experts. Throughout the design process, there was ongoing consultation with the government of the Brussels-Capital Region.

The first cycle of the Citizens' Climate Assembly consisted of six full Saturdays between February and June 2023. Participants received €40 for each day of participation.

The six days of the first cycle were structured as follows:

- Day 1: Presentation of the citizens' assembly
- Day 2: Reflection on and responses to the question, "What is it like to live in Brussels today?"
- Day 3: Looking ahead to the future
- Day 4: Engagement with 45 different stakeholders
- Day 5: Refining of proposals
- Day 6: Voting.

Developing expertise

Participants are first invited to share their own experiential knowledge. They are then provided with information on various aspects of the topic of deliberation, using an interactive approach. Field visits are also included as part of the process.

An advisory committee ensures that the information provided to members is objective and that all relevant stakeholders are represented, including the private and public sectors, associations, and academia.

Working groups

Given that the Brussels-Capital Region is bilingual (French- and Dutch-speaking), language is a complicating factor. In addition, many other languages are spoken. As a result, certain working groups tend to be primarily French-speaking, while others mainly speak English.

Deliberative process

The deliberative work of the assembly takes place in three stages. In the first, members share their own knowledge and personal experience – including habits, achievements, and challenges – around the topic in question. This then translates into an initial civic analysis of the current situation. What is

impressive about this process is that a diverse group of ordinary members of the public often manages to come up with an analysis in a single day that researchers would need months or years to develop.

In the second stage, participants exchange with a range of experts working within government administrations, academia, the private sector, the associative sector, and related civic initiatives. An important aspect of this process is its two-way nature: participants benefit from comprehensive information, while experts leave the assembly with new insights, ideas, and approaches. Based on this exchange, the first deliberations take place among the participants. These translate into the preliminary recommendations of the assembly.

In the third and final stage, the participants work cooperatively to finalise their recommendations. For this, they receive expert input and advice from a technical guidance committee made up of independent experts. Its role is to inform participants on whether certain proposals have already been made, but also to challenge them to go further with their recommendations.

On the final day of the assembly, the recommendations are put to the vote. Each component is considered separately, and the reasons for objection by certain participants may be noted. If a recommendation or component does not obtain a four-fifths majority, it will not be included in the final list of members' recommendations. It will, however, be added to the annexes to the report in order to ensure transparency.

For this process to be successful, the guidance and support of experienced facilitators is essential, especially in groups with high levels of diversity. If participants do not have the same language or educational levels, for instance, some may take the floor more than others. A good facilitator will ensure that all points are noted, that everyone has the opportunity to speak, and that discussions are conducted in a respectful manner. The quality of this process has a huge influence on the final output. Often, at the beginning of deliberations, participants will agree to a charter setting out certain ground rules. These will include, for example, respect for others and a commitment to act as an individual and not in the interest of a group.

Final report

At the final meeting of the assembly, the participants submit their report to the government administration and the environment minister. They are then invited to present the report at a public event.

The final report of the 2023 citizens' assembly focused on three main priorities and comprised approximately 60 proposals.[4]

Institutional response

The government of the Brussels-Capital Region has made a commitment to examining the feasibility of the recommendations put forward by the climate assembly. The competent minister or ministers decide on and communicate the follow-up to the work of the citizens' assembly by providing an initial response within three months and a second response within 12 months of the first. This response will either confirm that the government will examine the feasibility of a certain proposal or provides a detailed explanation why it cannot be implemented.

A self-managing group of ten randomly selected assembly members are invited to monitor the government's actions over one year and meets with ministers twice. Additionally, the government plans to develop a roadmap for integrating the

long-term vision and proposals of the citizens' assembly into the region's climate policy. This close collaboration with the government and its administrative bodies is expected to increase the impact of the recommendations on regional climate policy.

As some proposals may extend beyond the powers of the Brussels-Capital Region, the government has pledged to pass them on to the relevant levels of authority.

What emerged after the first cycle is that the government's official responses were highly technical. Furthermore, it tended to reason that proposals were already being implemented within current legislation. Nevertheless, it was certainly open to the assembly's proposals.

Communications and media coverage

The first cycle of deliberations was extensively documented through various media and formats, including videos, articles, and social media posts. While this high-quality content is an excellent tool for raising awareness of the Citizens' Climate Assembly, further promotion is needed. In particular, diversifying communication channels would help to reach a broader audience and strengthen the essential connection between the wider public and the citizens' assembly.

Newspaper coverage tended to follow a similar pattern: an article at the start of the assembly, one when the proposals were presented, and another on the government's response. Despite this coverage, the assembly remained relatively unknown to the general public.

Feedback, lessons learned and future initiatives

The first cycle primarily focused on assembly members making their own specific policy recommendations. However, as mentioned previously, the government noted in its initial feedback that many of these proposals were either already in the process of being implemented or at least planned. One of the key lessons drawn from this was the importance of starting with existing policies and their objectives before allowing participants to deliberate on the broader directions of these policies.

In response, it was decided that assembly members should be positioned less as ad hoc policymakers involved in the technical design of policies and more as contributors to the development of overarching policies and priorities. The expectation is that this shift will strengthen collaboration between decision-makers and members of the public, as assembly members highlight social dimensions and policy aspects that policymakers might otherwise overlook.

A further lesson related to the agenda-setting process. In order to support this process for the second cycle, the organisers of the assembly sought input from various stakeholders, including the government, parliament, municipalities, social partners, and actors involved in environmental action. This input was presented to participants in the form of a report before they selected the topic for the next assembly. For the third cycle, the organisers decided to reverse the process, first asking members of the public for their ideas and then seeking more specific guidance from stakeholders on these topics.

Another emerging lesson — though it still needs to be confirmed — relates to the breadth of the remit, as well as the scope and number of recommendations produced.

To achieve a more concrete and effective impact on climate governance, it may be necessary to adopt more focused remits and a smaller number of recommendations.

In terms of representation, the experiences of the first assembly show that this is a complex issue. The goal of this type of body is to create a reflection of society, ensuring that every citizen can potentially see themselves represented there. To improve diversity within the Brussels Citizens' Assembly on Climate, the following adjustments to the two-stage stratified random selection method are needed:

- Engage with institutions and organisations that have close connections with underrepresented groups from the first cycle (e.g. linguistic minorities, those with a low level of education, young people, people experiencing poverty, and residents of certain neighbourhoods). These organisations can help encourage participation if individuals from these groups are randomly selected.
- Oversample municipalities with lower response rates in the first cycle, particularly those where residents are socio-demographically less likely to participate in such a process, in response to the drop-out rate.

With regard to the future development of citizens' assemblies in Brussels, in order to ensure that the regional government and the administration are able to continue organising such assemblies and following up on their work, a legal framework is essential. This should clearly define both their mission and mandate, as well as ensure that the necessary resources can be allocated to ensure their continued operation.

Specifically in relation to the Citizens' Assembly for the Climate, a legal framework was approved in March 2024. This represents an important first step towards the institutionalisation of the project. However, this alone is not sufficient to guarantee its long-term sustainability. The next step is to define its mission and funding conditions within a government decree, a task that will need to be undertaken by the new Brussels-Capital government.

It will be crucial to strike the right balance here between ensuring stability and standardisation, which are essential for the continuity of the project, while also maintaining enough flexibility to allow for necessary adjustments as the initiative evolves.

Endnotes

1   This case study is based on conversations with Merlijn de Rijcke, secretary of the Brussels Citizens' Assembly on Climate, in addition to the following sources:
https://www.klimaatraad.brussels/;
https://www.g1000.org/en/news/brussels-launches-worlds-first-permanent-citizens-assembly-climate;
https://www.buergerrat.de/en/news/brussels-climate-assembly-faces-and-stories/.

2   Attachment 3 of report: (NL) Aanbevelingen van de Raad, eerste cyclus Wonen, zie
https://www.klimaatraad.brussels/ (FR) Recommandations de l'Assemblée, premier cycle Habitat, sur https://www.assembleeclimat.brussels/

3   Ibid.

4   Report with all the proposals of the first cycle:
(NL) Aanbevelingen van de Raad,
https://www.klimaatraad.brussels/ (FR) Recommandations de l'Assemblée, https://www.assembleeclimat.brussels/

Valjevo Deliberative Mini-Public[1]
Valjevo, Serbia: November 2020

by Predrag Momčilović, Director of the Center for Green Politics

Context

In order to explore the possible use of innovative participatory approaches in Serbia, two pilot citizens' assemblies in the form of deliberative mini-publics were organised in the cities of Belgrade and Valjevo on 21 and 28 November 2020, supported by the Jean Monnet Network ACT WB – Active Citizenship in the Western Balkans and managed by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade.

Deliberative mini-publics (DMP) are forums in which a sample of individuals selected from a group affected by a certain public issue are brought together to deliberate on that issue. The aim is to foster an exchange of information, arguments, opinions, and suggestions within a dialogue in which diverse and opposed opinions are welcome. The output of the deliberative process ordinarily consists of concrete policy suggestions developed by the participants.

Serbia is an exemplary case of a recent wave of autocratization, which had led to it becoming a hybrid regime, and it had no track record of deliberative innovations. Serbian citizens show relatively low interest in politics in general, and somewhat higher interest in local politics. The 2018 European Social Survey (ESS) found only 5% of respondents very interested in politics, and 16% quite interested.

Topic

The DMP held in Valjevo (deliberativna mini javnost u Valjevu) brought together a sample of citizens with different perspectives and socio-demographic backgrounds for inclusive discussions on the issue of air pollution.

Valjevo, a city in western Serbia with around 80,000 inhabitants, is among the cities with the worst air pollution in the country. The air in the city has been excessively polluted for years, demonstrating unacceptably high registered levels of harmful particles. The main sources of pollution, on which there is troublingly little data, include the city's heating plants, individual open fires, and factories owned by Krušik Holding Corporation, a state-owned company that produces military and civil related equipment. According to experts, the latter is the city's primary polluter.

In recent years, civil associations in Valjevo have begun raising awareness on the issue of air pollution, already recognised as a tangible problem by the city's residents. Local online portal *Valjevskaposla.info* devotes regular coverage to air pollution, while NGO Da Valjevo prodiše ("Let Valjevo Breathe") works to raise public awareness via the performing arts. Another local organisation, Lokalni front Valjevo ("Local Front Valjevo"), organised a public debate in the city hall after having collected more than a thousand signatures from Valjevo residents in addition to various other initiatives.

Their efforts prompted the municipal authorities to come up with a package of measures to improve air quality in the city. However, there is still no systematic report on the implementation of these measures, nor have the major polluters been identified. Furthermore, as excessive air pollution levels were officially registered in Valjevo, the municipal authorities were legally obliged to develop an air quality plan for the period 2016-2021 and an environmental protection programme for the period 2016-2025.

The DMP of November 2020 was organised to give members of the public the opportunity to express their needs, opinions, and proposals, as well as to obtain clear information on air pollution in their city and the proposed plans to tackle it.

The objectives of the DMP and the issues for discussion were determined according to three main criteria: relevance to attendees, suitability for presentation within the chosen timeframe, and absence of a clear social consensus.

Organisational structure

The DMPs were fostered by the Jean Monnet Network ACT WB – Active Citizenship in the Western Balkans and organised and managed by the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory at the University of Belgrade.

Participant selection

A random sample of 50 members of the public, representative of the adult population of Serbia, was selected by a contracted private agency. Among them, 40 were designated as participants, and ten as reserves, serving as last-minute replacements. In the end, 33 people were chosen to take part, all of whom participated on the day.▪ All 50 selected individuals received gift vouchers in recognition of their contributions.

▪ While 40 participants were originally planned to take part, due to the Covid-19 outbreak and the resulting need for the discussions to take place online, the number was reduced – both in order to reach sufficient diversity within the sample and to give all of the participants the time to express themselves fully.

Participant recruitment occurred in two steps. Initially, invitations were sent to a pool of 1,000 individuals randomly selected by the agency. Those who accepted were asked to fill out a recruitment questionnaire drafted by the organisers with substantive

Tables 1-4. Overview of participant demographics.

AGE	#	%
16–30	6	18,2
31–60	19	57,6
60+	8	24,7

GENDER	#	%
Men	12	36,4
Women	21	63,6

EDUCATION	#	%
Secondary	17	51,5
Post-secondary	16	48,5

ENGAGEMENT	#	%
"Regular" citizens	25	75,8
"Active" citizens	8	24,2

questions relevant to the topics for deliberation. The data generated was collected by the agency and supplied to the organisers. Participants then were selected based on explicit quotas for age, gender, and educational level in order to ensure that the structure of the final sample aligned with the socio-demographic composition of the population. The final selection aimed to represent a diversity of opinions.

Working methodology

The DMP in Valjevo took place online due to the Covid-19 outbreak. It was structured as follows:

- First round of moderated small-group discussions
- Plenary session with experts
- Second round of moderated small-group discussions
- Plenary session with decision-makers
- Closing session for the formulation of final proposals and voting.

Developing expertise

Being well-informed is a key precondition for successful action. The participants were keen to have expert input on a wide range of issues; these can be roughly grouped under the following topics:

- What are the specific health impacts of air pollution?
- Who are the main polluters?
- What does the data say about pollution, polluters, and possible solutions?
- What is the potential of green areas?
- What can we do as individuals?

The participating experts followed the plenary discussions very carefully and attempted to share as much information as possible within the given timeframe. Those questions that were posed at working-group level but not addressed during the plenary

discussion were noted down with a view to providing an answer at a later date.

Working groups

The participants were divided into four small groups comprising approximately eight individuals and a trained facilitator. Each group included six to seven "ordinary" members of the public who were particularly affected by the issue in question, as well as one or two "active" citizens who were actively and publicly involved in work on the issue.

Deliberative process

During the first round of small-group discussions, the groups were tasked with engaging in an open and informed conversation on the assigned topic and developing questions to put to a panel of independent experts at the first plenary session. Each group selected a representative to present these questions.

The next step was the first plenary session. At this session, the participants were joined by experts and representatives of civil associations advocating different positions. The representatives of each group were given the opportunity to ask questions on the chosen issue, identify problems, and suggest solutions.

In the second round of small-group discussions, the participants reflected on the information they had received from the experts and developed a set of policy proposals. The participants presented these proposals at the second plenary session and discussed relevant issues with decision-makers. Finally, each group then worked on finalising its proposals on the basis of the feedback received, again within smaller groups.

At the end of this process, three or four main suggestions were selected by majority

vote within each group and presented at the concluding plenary discussion. In total, ten proposals were voted on by all participants. Each participant was directed to choose their three preferred proposals, with three points awarded for first rank, two for second, and one for third. Due to time constraints, detailed recommendations were not developed, but rather guidelines that required further work and clarification.

Final report

Ultimately, ten recommendations were adopted unanimously. As a starting point, participants wished to receive accurate information on air pollution and specific advice relating to protective measures. There were several proposals to regulate space heating methods, and there was strong support for the legal regulation of environmentally harmful behaviour.

Institutional response

Unfortunately, certain representatives of the town authorities and public institutions who confirmed their participation failed to get involved in the civil assembly, which means that most of the questions regarding the local government plans and work remained unanswered.

Communications and media coverage

Awareness of the problem of air pollution is rising among citizens, and it is clear that this problem must begin to be addressed systematically. Civic initiatives are seen as important actors of awareness-raising – local media are expected to put even more pressure on the government, the local government seems disinterested, and the national government is expected to finance and control the local government. There is a great eagerness among citizens to engage in solving the problem, as much as

The participating experts followed the plenary discussions very carefully and attempted to share as much information as possible within the given timeframe.

is possible within their areas of activity, but this is dependent on relevant support from the decisionmakers. Local media covered the whole process of the Valjevo DMP.

Feedback, lessons learned and future initiatives

After the event, the organisers collected feedback from participants via an evaluation questionnaire, likely on paper and manually entered. The agency also collected data via a control questionnaire, which asked the same substantive questions as appeared in the recruitment and evaluation questionnaires. This was circulated to 50 randomly selected individuals belonging to the original sample of 1,000 who had not been selected to take part, as well as 50 individuals who had never been contacted about the DMP. The organisers were provided with the resulting data. The agency anonymised all of the data that it sent to the organisers so that it was only traceable through unique codes, excluding sample data, which included personal names.

In terms of participant feedback on the event, views on the expert dialogue were extremely positive. The level of interest shown, the data presented, the clarifications and advice given, and the solutions proposed were especially appreciated.

In contrast, the participants were considerably less satisfied with the contributions made by decision-makers. According to 50 per cent of participants, the comments given by government representatives were of little help in understanding the problem. Among other things, this was due to representatives' lack of knowledge or authority in those aspects in which participants were particularly interested, the tight timeframe, and general low rates of attendance. These factors reaffirmed the participants' view of decision-makers as lacking in initiative and

responsiveness in relation to the problem of air pollution.

Most participants expressed disappointment in decision-makers' lack of willingness to engage in a meaningful deliberation process with members of the public. A lesson that can be drawn from this experience is that the organisers of deliberative events in political systems with low responsiveness should motivate decision-makers to attend and commit to deliberation exercises with citizens. These efforts may include campaigns to increase politicians' understanding of the benefits of incorporating public deliberation into decision-making processes. Similar efforts should also target the general population in order to increase public demand for deliberative democracy.

Following on from the deliberative mini-publics held in 2020, the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, in cooperation with other organisations, organised further DMPs on issues related to food safety, spatial planning, and work with socially disadvantaged groups. Despite the fact that there is now a body of accumulated knowledge and experience on citizens' assemblies and deliberative mini-publics and a number of researchers working on this topic in Serbia, there is currently no intention to institutionalise this process.

Endnotes

1   This case study is based on the work of Irena Fiket, research associate at the Institute for Philosophy and Social Theory, University of Belgrade.

Citizens' Assembly for Climate of Catalonia[1]
Catalonia, Spain: November 2023 – February 2024

by Vedran Horvat, Director of the Institute for Political Ecology

Context

The concept for the Citizens' Assembly for Climate of Catalonia (Assemblea Ciutadana pel Clima, Asamblea Ciudadana por el Clima) was developed by the citizen participation unit of the government of Catalonia (Generalitat de Catalyuna). The unit has significant experience of conducting participative processes, with more than 400 having taken place since 2005. In 2019, its personnel participated in a training on civic deliberation. Out of this grew the ambitious idea of launching a citizens' assembly.

Under pressure from civil society organisations and with the political will to transform regional climate policy, the climate ministry – together with the presidency – made a clear commitment to commission a citizens' assembly and to take the resulting (non-binding) recommendations into account in public policymaking. The Citizens' Assembly for Climate of Catalonia met for the first time in November 2023 and concluded its work in February 2024.[2]

Topic

The decision-making process on the topic for the citizens' assembly was protracted – lasting almost 18 months, with the 2021 regional elections taking place in between. With the help of resources developed by organisations including the OECD and the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA), in addition to citizen consultations, ten criteria were established to facilitate the decision-making process.

Using these criteria, a range of possibilities were discussed and narrowed down to answer to two perspectives: citizen participation and climate change. Working groups were then established to fine-tune the further toward questions, an innovative approach that had significant influence on the eventual design of the assembly. The specific questions that resulted from this process focused on two topics: 1) the deployment of sustainable energy infrastructure; and 2) the type of agri-food model that should be developed in Catalonia. The goal was to bring together 100 randomly selected people to develop recommendations on these two issues that would have an impact on public policies in the region.[3]

Organisational structure

The design of the Citizens' Assembly for Climate of Catalonia was inspired by the Scottish model[4] and managed by a secretariat staffed by representatives of the climate change ministry and the citizen participation ministry. Working groups were also created with responsibility for very specific tasks (session design, proposal of speakers, etc.). There was also political commitment as representatives of ministries were involved in the work of the assembly.

In addition, a governance committee was established that brought together experts on democracy and climate change. Its role was supervisory, both during the assembly and after its completion. The committee also took part in the decision-making process design and in follow-up on the assembly's recommendations. Another, larger, group was also established, consisting of a broader group of stakeholders such as civic associations and environmental organisations. Parallel to that, regular meetings and consultations were held with political representatives.

Participant selection

There were two stages of sortition. A 20,000-person sample was defined for the whole region on the basis of key demographic criteria developed in conjunction with the Statistical Institute of Catalonia. Initial invitations signed by the president of the Government of Catalonia were sent to these individuals. Those who then wished to participate could apply through a dedicated web page, which collected information on eight further stratification criteria. Eventually, 700 valid applications were received; of that final list, 100 people were selected in accordance with the initiative's stratification targets. On the first day of the assembly, 97 people attended.

The ambition of the CLIMAS project (within which the assembly was organized) was to support a transformation to climate resilience by offering an innovative problem-oriented climate adaptation toolbox.

Working methodology

The assembly consisted of two different groups, in accordance with the two topics (energy infrastructure and agri-food model) – in essence, two assemblies in parallel. A special Climate change Citizens Engagement Toolbox, co-designed with stakeholders adopting a value-based approach, design thinking methods and inclusivity at heart. The ambition of the CLIMAS project (within which the assembly was organized) was to support a transformation to climate resilience by offering an innovative problem-oriented climate adaptation toolbox, co-designed together with stakeholders by applying a value-based approach, design thinking methods and citizen science mechanisms.[5] Another key innovation in this citizen assembly was the political dilemma approach that included tensions between the common ground and various trade-offs to build the citizen judgments (where both learning and deliberation decided on the final outcomes).

Participants within each topical assembly were split off further into three groups. In each group, challenges, context and questions were presented. Framing and prioritising among the vast amount of the content presented a huge challenge for consolidation, primarily due to scarcity of time. The next stage led to more in-depth discussions and elaboration of recommendations within each group. Special attention was paid to resolving cognitive biases, identifying speakers, and the editorial framing of the recommendations.

Five in-person assembly meetings took place in five different cities between 18 November 2023 and 10 February 2024. Meetings lasted seven to eight hours and were held at the weekend. Participants received a compensatory sum of 65 EUR per meeting. They also received additional support (care, transport) if needed. Fourteen experts and professional facilitators were specifically hired to facilitate the process. The overall rate of attendance was 83%, and the entire assembly cost a total of 1.3 million EUR to organise.

Developing expertise

The learning phase consisted of only three sessions, which was fewer than originally hoped. Each working group met with a range of experts, who took very different approaches. Information was provided on the topics (energy and food within the climate context), citizens' assemblies, on public policies, and, most importantly, on the various different approaches to solving political dilemmas. Information packs were also provided to participants, which were developed with the assistance of science journalists. In total, 30 experts took part in the learning phase, with different levels of involvement.

The participants were provided with various types of information, including factual information on the issues discussed, information on the policies and competences of the Generalitat de Catalunya, and the various positions identified within each issue. They were presented with the the real situation in terms of formulating public policy, as every decision involves a series of advantages and disadvantages, and an overview of the subject for discussion is required. It was essential that participants were aware of the current situation regarding the Catalan energy and food and agriculture systems, and that they understood the framework of competences, as well as the various actions carried out to date (including the global, regional and local context). With this information, participants could adopt a position regarding 'where we are going' and above all, emphasising 'how to do it'.

Working groups

As the Assembly has a total of 100 part-icipants divided into two groups of 50 (working on one topic each), sub-groups for discussion were established. The main criterion for the creation of these groups and sub-groups is diversity, to ensure that as many views as possible were reflected in this deliberative process.

Deliberative process

A list of recommended actions from each group and the reasoning behind them was developed for both topics via a consensus-based process. All pwwwarticipants were encouraged to share their opinions. In the end, 25 recommendations were drafted by participants on agri-food and 23 on energy, in collaboration with facilitators. These were voted on in the plenary, when both groups returned from their isolated work. A large majority of these received at least two thirds of the vote; many of them 100 per cent.

Institutional Response

A key challenge for organizers was how the new government would treat the outputs of the assembly, given that it was a citizen project organised by public institutions under their predecessors. Important here is that climate change is a long-term problem, which we all have the responsibility to solve and cannot be tackled within single political terms.

Some lessons were learned in relation to the government department responsible for implementation. For instance, it would have been beneficial to invest more time and resources in the preparations for the assembly. Additionally, it was noted that administrative procedures with rigid criteria and strict requirements (for instance surrounding procurement) hindered the whole process on occasion.

Ultimately, the potential implementation of the 48 recommendations remains ambiguous and with an undefined outcome, as there was no clear reporting or follow-up on what has been accepted or not.

Communications and media coverage

Significant efforts (media outreach, engaging journalists and editors) were made at the beginning to raise awareness of and public interest in the assembly. While its launch attracted media interest, this declined noticeably during the process, although interviews on the assembly with various political representatives were published during its lifespan. Interest rose again at the end of the process, when the recommendations were made public. A number of articles on the assembly were published prior to the May 2024 regional elections.

Feedback, lessons learned & future initiatives

Feedback on the deliberative process suggested that, while the political dilemmas approach adopted by the assembly centres on debating controversial issues, participants often attempted to avoid conflicts and controversial debates. As such, it was sometimes difficult to maintain the focus of the debate on the key issues to be discussed. The process was nevertheless seen as positive by participants, a large majority of whom said that they would be willing to take part in the assembly again.

Finally, in organisational terms, there were some logistical issues due to the distances involved. Most of the participants were reasonably satisfied with the transport options that were made available, but it would have been more helpful to offer greater choice.

The fact that the assembly was a success was largely thanks to the dedication of all involved. Not only did it result in alleged change in public policies (which remains unclear); it also had an important impact on those who participated. Around 86 per cent of participants – many of whom were not educated to university level – said they learned a lot about climate change through their participation, and many said that they changed their views on climate change. Ultimately, 95 per cent of participants said that they supported the assembly's recommendations.[6]

Endnotes

1   This case study is based on an interview with Pablo Garcia Arcos and Núria Pérez Milán, coordinators of the Citizens' Assembly for Climate of Catalonia, in addition to the following source: https://participa.gencat.cat/processes/assembleaclima?locale=en.

2   https://www.climas-project.eu/an-assembly-of-100-catalan-citizens/

3   https://participa.gencat.cat/processes/assembleaclima/f/3828/?locale=en

4   https://www.knoca.eu/national-assemblies/scotlands-climate-assembly

5   https://www.climas-project.eu/resources/tools-and-guidelines/

6   https://participa.gencat.cat/processes/assembleaclima/f/4057/

Conclusions and Lessons Learned

A Role to Play – if not now, then when?

The deliberative wave that has made its way across Europe over recent years has demonstrated that citizens are hungry for democracy – even those who are too hungry to participate in democracy – and that they are willing to take part in democratic processes. This wave manifested through hundreds of citizens' assemblies, deliberative mini-publics, citizens' panels, and juries.[1] These forums met with varying degrees of success, but they have all been instrumental in demonstrating that the boundaries of democratic life can be extended much further in favour of the public interest.

As this wave of deliberation broke over Europe, it has become clear that European decision-makers missed the opportunity to make the European Green Deal a democratic process that would evolve by means of citizen participation and anchor social change deeper in societies. EU policymaking remains increasingly separate and disconnected from Europeans' everyday lives.

The citizens' assemblies were not only an attempt at democratic innovation; they were also the response of people whose voices needed to be heard – and they weren't. Successful examples illustrate that such assemblies can reinforce citizen agency and increase the capacity for collective action. However, in the case of the European Green Deal, it is evident that the opportunity was lost to assure citizens that their voices will be heard and that their wellbeing lies at the heart of the green transition. We cannot say that this omission was fully intentional, but it does show us the direction we need to take in order to repair our democracies.

The continuation of the European Green Deal through the Clean Industrial Deal and other policy packages for the moment does not bring a lot of hope that things will be different. Just the opposite, by prioritising shareholders and big companies over citizens and sacrificing sustainability rules and public interest, this Deal could find itself just as quickly contested and rejected by social majorities.

Citizens' assemblies can still play a role, but not by acting a fictional part and holding the cards in a game with known outcomes. Instead, through their very democratic core they must form a bulwark against authoritarianism and climate denialism, against new extractivism and deregulation of human rights. And as some of our case

studies have hinted at, they might not need permission or an institutional green light to have impact, to shape debates, or to constitute political power. What if citizens' assemblies could act proactively to save Europe's sustainable future exactly with those who were – so far – excluded, underrepresented, or forgotten. Let us imagine a future where adverse policies are met with hundreds and thousands of city halls and public buildings filled with self-organised citizens' assemblies that do not allow further backsliding. In such a scenario, citizens' assemblies – in their many shapes and sizes – can indeed become our last frontier in defence of a sustainable and democratic Europe.

For this purpose, in this final section, we summarise the lessons learned during our research and identify tension points which require further attention.

Institutionalisation vs. autonomy

For the moment, the prevailing view promoted by organisations including the OECD, the European Climate Foundation, and KNOCA is that the work of citizens' assemblies needs to be incorporated into the political system, which often implies a type of institutionalisation.

According to the OECD, "structural changes to make representative public deliberation an integral part of countries' democratic architecture is a way to effectively promote true transformation, as institutionalization anchors follow-up and response mechanisms in regulations. Creating regular opportunities for more people to have the privilege to serve as members in citizens' assemblies not only improves policies and services, it also scales the positive impact that participation has on people's perception of themselves and others, strengthening societal trust and cohesion."[2]

Citizens' assemblies can still play a role, but not by acting a fictional part and holding the cards in a game with known outcomes.

While institutionalisation certainly has benefits – ensuring multi-fold impacts on policy, institutions, the general public, and participants[3] and assuring that recommendations are implemented – it can also reduce the autonomy and political power of assemblies. Furthermore, in the event of the premature institutionalisation of citizens' assemblies, this could damage citizens' perception and trust in political institutions. Members of the public need an autonomous standpoint from which they can have transformative impacts on political institutions or policies. The integration of citizens' assemblies into the government architecture must therefore result from the transformation of the governance system, not the desire to co-opt these bodies into a closed political system where their role can be controlled and framed by the power of political parties in order to neutralise citizens' voices. This is particularly relevant in societies with weaker democracies and safeguarding mechanisms that are insufficient to ensure their independence.

Proximity to authorities

Another prevailing view is that the work of citizens' assemblies can only be efficient and meaningful if it is commissioned by the authorities, as this is the only way of achieving social or policy impacts. While this statement is true to some extent, it applies particularly to Western European democracies and cannot be extrapolated across Europe. In certain places, deliberation is a crucial instrument of citizen empowerment and cannot depend on the will or recognition of the authorities (particularly in the case of captured states, where the authorities fail to respect democratic standards or abuse their public function). Judging the value of citizens' assemblies by government recognition alone may well be too narrow an interpretation that serves to undermine their autonomy and stymie their future evolution.

In the case studies chosen for this report and in overall practice, citizens' assemblies are thought to operate in close collaboration with local, national, or European governments. This perception is incomplete and not applicable to states or societies where relations between key political agents are more hostile or disrupted. This widespread notion carved out by deliberative experiences in Western democracies, namely that citizens' assemblies make sense mainly or only when organisers have a green light from authorities, does not resonate amid captured states or political violence. In those situations, there is no logic to asking permission or buy-in for a citizens' assembly process. But this does not mean that the practice cannot have value regardless.

In fact, our understanding of the scope and impact of deliberation must be differentiated and take into account the other roles and value that citizens' assemblies can bring even when confronted with hostile authorities. Impact should be understood beyond the immediate policy sphere, and the demonstration of collective action that a citizens' assembly entails should be recognised for its broader transformative potential – not only in relation to authorities but to society as a whole. Disagreement and protest can be just as powerful a motive to establish such a body as the desire to pursue common policy objectives.

Proximity to political power

The influence of party ideology on the commissioning of citizens' assemblies is still largely overlooked in the existing literature on democratic innovations. However, the place of the governing party on the political spectrum is a relevant variable in the study of the adoption of various deliberative procedures.[4] Political parties with distinct ideological affiliations and consequently different values and interpretations of democracy hold different understandings

of citizen participation, its democratic purpose, and its centrality to the functioning of representative democracy.

Left-wing parties have traditionally been associated with advocating greater citizen involvement in political decision-making, an idea that is reinforced by evidence in the sense that leftist politicians have a more favourable attitude towards deliberative procedures and their outcomes than right-wing representatives. Yet, it seems that perception or association is still quite different to active support. While ideological proximity can be a reason to be more engaged in fostering deliberation and supporting representative democracy, the same proximity can also be a motivation to stay away from such interventions and allow more autonomy of civil society. This perhaps explains a murky and more arbitrary picture when it comes to who is initiating and responding to the deliberative wave. On the whole, this seems much more the domain of social democrats than of the Left or the Greens, perhaps surprising given the latter's ideological emphasis on participatory democracy. [5]

Additional key values and structural needs

Building on those identified in the paper, we would like to highlight the importance of cultivating the following additional values – and of bearing in mind the following organisational aspects – when convening citizens' assemblies.

Trust

Citizens' assemblies can emerge due to lack of recognition of citizen agency or due to lack of trust in political institutions. Yet, when properly organised and led, they also provide the opportunity to regain trust in democratic processes and repair our democratic systems. Moreover, at participant level, assemblies

Impact should be understood beyond the immediate policy sphere, and the demonstration of collective action that a citizens' assembly entails should be recognised for its broader transformative potential – not only in relation to authorities but to society as a whole.

foster a collective cohesion within the group and increase individuals' confidence in their own agency.

Inclusion

A common criticism of citizens' assemblies is exclusivity and a lack of representation. To guard against this, the methodology developed for participant selection must ensure diversity and the inclusion of all societal groups, as well as various perspectives and interests, in the work of assembly. For us Greens, it is of utmost importance that intersectionality is introduced as a key principle for defining the range of invitees and the sortition procedure.[6]

Transparency & legitimacy

The principle of transparency is often given too little attention during the organisation of citizens' assemblies. In order to ensure the legitimacy and impact of assembly recommendations, it is crucial that the general public and all stakeholders are aware of and follow the process. Special efforts should be made to ensure transparency in recruitment, documentation, governance, and evidence base compilation, as assemblies have been criticised for the opacity of these processes in the past.

A lack of transparency can undermine the legitimacy of the deliberative process and in many cases produce counter-effects, thus further deepening the lack of public trust. By contrast, the general public tends to support the work of citizens' assemblies when transparency levels are sufficiently high. The legitimacy of citizens' assemblies and their unelected membership can also be called into question by elected political officials who are not willing to "lend" their decision-making powers to them, which is often the case in other deliberative practices such as participative budgeting. This can prove challenging during the process of developing policy recommendations.[7]

Resources

It is crucial to ensure that sufficient resources and time are made available for the organisation and implementation of full cycles of citizens' assemblies. If this is not possible, it is often better to postpone or cancel as there may be a high price to pay for conducting an unsuccessful assembly.

Safe space

Citizens' assemblies should be a safe space in which trust in the collective process can be built among participants. This requires excellent facilitation and strong governance structures that prevent the development of populism or polarisation during any stage of the process.

Political education for citizens

As a democratic exercise in which participants learn not only about the issue in question but also about exercising democracy, citizens' assemblies reportedly provide a very practical and transformative form of political education. In order to foster this learning, participants must have enough time and space to familiarise themselves with the topic and receive relevant and trustworthy information on which to base their decisions. In relation to broader society, political education ensures a higher degree of political literacy and can therefore make citizens' assemblies better equipped to fulfil their role.

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Citizens' Assemblies and European Green Deal A perfect (mis)match?

The European Green Deal has missed a key chance to tap into the recent deliberative wave across Europe. Yet the green transition is ongoing and must accelerate – with citizens at its core. Its success hinges on meeting people's needs and embedding social impact in strong environmental policies. Citizens' assemblies offer a way to ensure voices are heard at all levels, from local communities to EU institutions. This publication explores early lessons and opportunities to shape a green transition that truly serves the public interest.

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