



Climate assemblies: emerging trends, challenges and opportunities

A report of the Knowledge Network
on Climate Assemblies

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Climate assemblies are an unprecedented and exciting development in climate governance. The OECD talks about a “deliberative wave” of citizens’ assemblies that bring together diverse groups of everyday people that resemble the wider population to learn, deliberate and make recommendations². At the peak of that wave, over the last three years, we have witnessed increasing experimentation with climate assemblies, at various levels of governance, including over a dozen national assemblies across Europe.

Transition to net zero and climate resilient societies requires deep social and economic transformations that will have significant impacts on citizens’ choices and behaviours. The interest in climate assemblies reflects a growing recognition that such transitions need to engage the public directly, both to ensure better policy-making and to improve acceptance of decisions which will have significant effects on people’s day-to-day lives. It needs to be done in ways that responds to those people demanding urgent and immediate action and those who are more sceptical of the pace of change to avoid democratic and climate backlash and policy reversal.

Climate assemblies are not the only way to involve citizens in decision making, but widespread interest and enthusiasm for this form of engagement means we have much to learn from current practice.

But do they work? Do climate assemblies improve policy? Do they lead to wider acceptance amongst the public for sustained action on climate?

The answer is not straightforward. The first wave of climate assemblies provides evidence that citizens are willing and able to come to robust policy recommendations on complex and controversial aspects of climate policy. At times, they have also had notable impacts on climate policy, public debate and participants attitudes and behaviours. However, too many expectations have been put on a novel democratic institution that is yet to be fully embedded within our political systems. For more sustained impacts, experimentation needs to be replaced by institutionalisation and embedding of climate assemblies. Climate assemblies cannot be expected to solve all our current governance problems, but they can become a significant and effective element of climate governance.

This leads to the significant question: **how can climate assemblies be integrated more effectively into our political systems so that their impacts on climate governance are more robust and sustained?**

The Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) was established in June 2021 by the European Climate Foundation to develop answers to that more nuanced question.

1 Thanks to Alina Averchenkova, Bjørn Bedsted, Charlotte Billingham, Erica Hope, Lise Deshautel, Mark Hesselund Beanland for comments on earlier drafts of this report.

2 OECD. 2020. Innovative citizen participation and new democratic institutions: Catching the deliberative wave. Paris: OECD. <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>

Box 1. What is KNOCA?

- KNOCA is a European-based network funded by the European Climate Foundation that aims to improve the commissioning, design, implementation, impact and evaluation of climate assemblies, using evidence, knowledge exchange and dialogue.
- KNOCA has more than 600 members from 39 countries, including policy officials, practitioners, academics and activists.
- KNOCA documents climate assembly practice, identifies and disseminates best practice for impact and shapes future trends, providing learning and advice through open and closed channels.
- Find out more and join KNOCA at <https://knoca.eu/>

This report draws on the first 18 months of KNOCA's work, offering an overview of what we can learn from the recent wave of climate assemblies (particularly at national level) and what work needs to be done to improve their impact. The report places climate assemblies within the broader field of public participation, explaining how they can make valuable contributions to climate policy and governance. But experience from the first wave of assemblies shows that current practice has its limitations. If climate assemblies are to be used more extensively as a way of engaging citizens in shaping climate action, it is critical to better understand and be responsive to the conditions that need to be in place for different impacts to be realised. This is KNOCA's agenda.

Public participation in climate governance

Public participation in climate governance is seen as valuable for a number of reasons:

1. **The insights of everyday people can make climate policy more robust.** Citizens bring a different way of looking at policy from those who work within climate governance communities. They can bring new ways of approaching problems and articulating solutions that are attuned to their interests, needs and attitudes.
2. **Public participation can help break political deadlocks on climate action.** Politicians across the world have been too slow to react to the climate crisis, despite the clarity of science on the need for action and the availability of policy tools. When given the chance to participate, citizens are often ahead of politicians, giving political leaders the confidence and willingness to take action.
3. **Public participation can increase the legitimacy and public acceptance of social action on climate.** As the transition to low-carbon futures unfold, it will impact people's everyday lives more directly. Knowing that fellow citizens have been part of the decision-making processes increases public confidence and consent to challenging decisions.
4. **Public participation can promote a more climate aware and politically confident citizenry.** Through participation, everyday people learn more about the climate crisis and develop the skills and confidence to participate more fully in climate action at individual and collective levels.

Box 2. Defining public participation

This report focuses on public participation understood as direct engagement of everyday people in political decision making. It is often confused with stakeholder participation where organised interests (for example, NGOs) are the participants. Stakeholder participation plays an important role in contemporary politics, but is different from engaging everyday people directly.

Since the adoption of the Aarhus Convention, public participation in climate decision making has become a more standard expectation and often a legal obligation. The EU Governance Regulation introduces requirements at both the European and Member State level. For example, Article 10 on National Energy and Climate Plans (NECPs) states that each Member State “shall ensure that the public is given early and effective opportunities to participate in the preparation of the draft integrated national energy and climate plan..., in the preparation of the final plan well before its adoption — as well as of the long-term strategies”. Article 11 requires Member States to establish a permanent multi-level climate and energy dialogue that enables the general public to actively engage and discuss the different scenarios envisaged for energy and climate policies. The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) EU directive is another example with explicit provisions for public participation.

But, too often commitments to public participation have failed to live up to their promise. Participation initiatives have been sporadic, little more than a tick box exercise, implemented in an inconsistent manner and too late in policy cycles – with little evidence of impact on decisions and frustration for those citizens involved in the process.

Why climate assemblies?

Climate assemblies promise to solve many of the weaknesses of previous participation efforts. They do this through combining recruitment of a diverse group of everyday people that resemble the wider population with a rigorous and facilitated process of learning and deliberation and coming to collective recommendations.

Members of climate assemblies are usually recruited through a two stage “democratic lottery”. In the first stage, letters are sent to randomly selected households, often with extra letters targeted to areas where participation levels are typically low (e.g., poorer neighbourhoods). Alternatively, randomly generated phone numbers are used. In the second stage, quota sampling is applied to the pool of volunteers to ensure that the members of the assembly resemble the diversity of wider society³. In Scotland’s Climate Assembly, for example, age, gender, household income, ethnicity, geography, rurality, disability and attitude towards climate change were used.

This form of recruitment leads to a highly diverse set of participants and means that the assembly is not dominated by powerful and entrenched interests or politicians worried about re-election.

Deliberation is critical to assemblies. Members hear from and question a range of witnesses, not just technical experts, but also advocates and those with direct experience of climate impacts. Through active facilitation, members are given the time to learn, deliberate and collaborate in developing recommendations.

³ For more detail on the selection process, see FIDE (Foundation for Innovation in Democracy – Europe). 2023. Organising a Democratic Lottery. Brussels: FIDE. <https://www.fide.eu/research-and-documentation/organising-a-democratic-lottery>

The diversity of the assembly and the learning and deliberation members go through avoids many of the problems associated with other forms of public participation and means that they are recognised as a trustworthy and legitimate body by the broader public.

Documenting climate assemblies and their impacts

KNOCA's first task has been to document existing practice and impacts. Without understanding what is happening on the ground, it is impossible to develop meaningful guidance on good practice. Most climate assemblies have been organised in the last three years. That means that not all of their impacts have rippled through the system.



Figure 1. National and local climate assemblies across Europe

Key: Yellow = national; Red = sub-national

KNOCA's main focus has been to learn from the national-level climate assemblies (and juries) in Europe⁴, given the novelty of the use of citizens' assemblies at this level and the range and extent of governance powers available to national governments. Lessons have also been drawn from innovative practice at other levels of governance.

Through desk research, interviews and a series of popular learning calls with organisers and observers⁵, KNOCA has collated information on the key features of around a dozen national-level climate assemblies.

In all cases where climate assemblies have developed their own recommendations,⁶ these have been far more

4 National assemblies and juries have taken place in Austria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Jersey, Luxembourg, Poland, Scotland, Spain, UK. For details of national climate assemblies, see <https://knoqa.eu/national-climate-assemblies/>. For a map of climate assemblies, see <https://knoqa.eu/map-of-national-assemblies/>

5 For recordings of KNOCA learning calls and workshops, see <https://knoqa.eu/learning-calls-and-workshops/>

6 In Finland the shorter Citizens' Jury was tasked with reviewing proposed government policies

progressive than existing national policy. Citizens have been willing to propose policy interventions in areas where governments have been unwilling to act – for example on limiting flights, personal diets and prohibiting advertising on carbon-intensive products – and have been sceptical of attempts to rely on untested negative carbon technologies (e.g., carbon capture).

The most striking overall learning is that the impact of climate assemblies has varied widely because of the different ways they have been organised and integrated into the political system. For example:

- Most have been commissioned by governments, often at the behest of parliaments, but two (Germany and Poland) have been commissioned by NGOs and one (UK) directly by parliamentary select committees.
- Their tasks have varied. Most assemblies have been given broad questions focused on achieving carbon reductions within a particular time frame, often with explicit requirements to consider fairness or social justice. Some assemblies (Scotland and Spain) have included adaptation in their remits. Recent assemblies have had a more focused task, for example on energy poverty (Poland) and biodiversity loss (Ireland).
- The resources available to assemblies have been very different. Some have been well financed by government, meeting between six to eight weekends. Others have had to deal with smaller budgets, requiring external support (for example, from the European Climate Foundation) and had less time for members to learn, deliberate and come to recommendations.
- The commitment to respond by commissioners has varied, along with the way in which they have been integrated into the political system. In France, the President promised to take all the recommendations direct to parliament, regulation or referendum, although did not follow through in all cases. In Ireland, recommendations on climate were considered by a special parliamentary committee which then reported to government. In France and Scotland an extra assembly weekend was added for members to review the government response.

These variations help explain the diversity of impacts of climate assemblies that we have seen to date. It is too early to evaluate the full impact of many assemblies, but already significant impacts can be discerned (see Box 3)

Box 3. Examples of impacts of climate assemblies

Impact on policy. The Irish Climate Action Bill (2020) incorporated the majority of the recommendations from the Citizens' Assembly 2016-18. The Climate and Resilience Bill (2021) translated a number of the French Convention measures into law, although many were in a modified form.

Impact on institutions. The Climate Change Committee used the recommendations from Climate Assembly UK to frame its Sixth Carbon Budget and integrated deliberative methods into its work. The Joint Parliamentary Committee on Climate Action established to consider the Irish Citizens' Assembly's recommendations was made a permanent body. The Danish Climate Assembly has been given same status as (sectoral) social partnerships.

Impact on public. The French Convention stimulated extensive public debate on climate transition that raised the salience of climate amongst politicians. The level of knowledge of the assembly amongst the Austria public was fairly high. Experimental evidence indicates that the public has more trust and confidence in citizens' assemblies than other political institutions.

Impact on participants. Strong and consistent effects on the attitudes and behaviours of members towards climate action can be found across almost all assemblies, with evidence from the UK that this is sustained and even enhanced over time.

While KNOCA's focus has initially been at national level, we have begun to document emerging practice at other levels, not least because most assemblies have happened at local or municipal level. Innovative practice includes, for example, the first permanent climate assembly established in the Brussels Capital Region that began its work earlier this year; a youth climate assembly in the Ida-Viru county of Estonia which resulted in young people taking an active role in the regional transition process; the climate assembly in the German city of Erlangen which was integrated into a novel process involving a stakeholder forum and a local research institute.

KNOCA has also run learning calls on emerging transnational processes: the European Citizens' Panels and the Global Assembly⁷.

Promoting best practice for impact

KNOCA is focused on improving commissioning, design, implementation, follow-up and evaluation of climate assemblies to ensure robust impact on climate governance. Its objective is to produce useable guidance to support organisers, designers, practitioners and advocates in their work. And it aims to produce that guidance through active collaboration with the wider KNOCA community which has extensive experience in deliberative processes and climate governance. KNOCA workshops on key areas of assembly practice have been vital spaces for sharing learning and promoting innovation.

In 2021, KNOCA launched with the publication of four research Briefings authored by Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) Climate Outreach, Danish Board of Technology (DBT), Grantham Institute and Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS)⁸. These initial Briefings lay out a broad set of challenges related to framing of climate within assemblies; integration into the policy process; legitimacy and resonance in wider society; and impact and legacy of climate assemblies. These have been followed by two further Briefings on evaluation and governance by the University of Westminster.

In 2022, KNOCA published a first wave of guidance based on knowledge development projects led by a range of partner organisations, including Bureau Burgerberaad, Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST), Federation for Innovation in Democracy – Europe (FIDE), Grantham Institute, Rinascimento Green and TPX Impact⁹.

⁷ <https://knoca.eu/knoca-learning-call-on-transnational-climate-assemblies/>

⁸ <https://knoca.eu/knoca-briefings/>

⁹ <https://knoca.eu/guidance/>

This guidance includes:

- **Preparing for a climate assembly**¹⁰ – practical steps for policy officials who are organising a climate assembly. Most guidance focuses on the organisation of the assembly itself. This guidance provides a more detailed explanation of what policy officials need to consider before, during and after the assembly to increase the likelihood that it has impact on policy.
- **Setting the remit**¹¹ – guidance on how best to set the task for a climate assembly so that it is both challenging and manageable. Many assemblies have arguably had too broad an agenda, expecting members to be able to produce recommendations across the whole range of climate policies. Such comprehensive assemblies have their place – for example, in opening up climate policy where governments have made little progress. Ireland’s Citizens’ Assembly 2016-18 is a good case in point where the government explicitly asked how Ireland could move from its laggard status to become a leader in climate action. Remits are arguably more effective when focused on aspects of policy that have the most significant negative climate impacts and/or where government is finding it difficult to act. Examples exist where citizens themselves play a key role in selecting the topics for the assembly to work on (e.g., Denmark, local citizens’ jury practice in the UK).
- **Key drivers of impact**¹² – guidance highlighting the fundamental role that choice of question, follow-up and communication have on the success of a climate assembly. This work has helped identify key limitations in current practice (see Box 4) and offered initial insights into how practice in those areas might be improved.
- **Impact evaluation framework**¹³ – a first draft of a framework that will enable comparison of the impact of climate assemblies. Impact is understood in a broad sense across areas of impact (policy, social, systematic) and types of impact (instrumental, conceptual and capacity building). The European Climate Foundation has commissioned a number of impact evaluations of climate assemblies, the results of which will be used to inform KNOCA’s future work and further iterations of the framework.

KNOCA has also commissioned work on attitudes of climate policy actors towards climate assemblies,¹⁴ which has highlighted the limited understanding of assemblies and the ambiguous role of climate NGOs which rarely see the value of these processes (see Box 4).

10 <https://knoca.eu/preparing-for-a-climate-assembly/>

11 <https://knoca.eu/setting-the-remit/>

12 <https://knoca.eu/key-drivers-of-impact/>

13 <https://knoca.eu/impact-evaluation-framework/>

14 <https://knoca.eu/policy-actors-attitudes-to-climate-assemblies/>

Box 4. Where current practice can be improved

While climate assemblies are having positive impacts on climate governance, they have not fully delivered on their promise. KNOCA has found that limitations of climate assemblies tend to be connected to four main issues:

The definition of an appropriate remit. The mandate given to assemblies is often too broad, covering the full range of climate policy, and assemblies are rarely aligned with policy windows to enable policy impact. Public authorities seem reluctant to task assemblies with dealing with politically salient climate policy challenges. Citizens' assemblies work best when they are asked to deal with issues that have distinct trade-offs and where politicians have been unable or unwilling to act. Questions remain as to how best to frame remits to enable assembly members to productively interrogate demands for systems transformations.

Transparency and communication of the process. Broader public and stakeholder awareness of the assembly process and its recommendations is often limited, with ineffective media engagement and outreach to stakeholders. A number of assemblies have not been transparent about their recruitment, governance and evidence base.

Scepticism amongst climate governance actors. For many actors within the climate community, climate assemblies are an unknown quantity – and for some a challenge to their established position. Concerns are raised about the capacity of citizens to deal with complex climate issues and perceptions that members of assemblies are climate activists rather than everyday people. Climate NGOs are unsure how to position themselves in relation to assemblies, rarely prioritise public participation in climate action in their lobbying activities and are not fully aware of how climate assemblies could help advance climate action more broadly and support the achievement of their specific objectives.

Integration in the political system. Most attention is given to organising the assembly – relatively little on preparation by the commissioning body and others to follow-up on the recommendations. Roles of public officials, politicians, stakeholders and assembly members in promoting and monitoring action tend not to be clearly articulated and distributed once the assembly has made its recommendations.

In its third year of operation KNOCA will be working on a number of projects that are critical to understanding and improving the conditions for the success of climate assemblies. These will include:

1. **Embedding climate assemblies.** Time and again we hear the story that a climate assembly has produced robust and challenging recommendations, but that they have had little impact on the sponsoring authority and stakeholders. Not enough attention is being paid to how authorities and other actors can best prepare themselves for receiving and responding to proposals, or the role that different actors – including politicians, public officials, stakeholders, members – should play after an assembly has made its recommendations. Plenty of guidance exists on how to run an assembly, but almost nothing on how to prepare the follow-up. Our aim is to produce that guidance working closely with policy officials and others who have been responsible for responding to climate assemblies.
2. **Institutionalising climate assemblies.** Climate assemblies tend to be ad-hoc events – a single intense moment of citizen engagement. This is also the case for citizens' assemblies more generally. But the

climate crisis cannot be solved by a single climate assembly. Everyday people will need to be engaged regularly as new challenges and conflicts emerge in the transition to net zero and climate resilient societies. One way to do this is by institutionalising assemblies so that they are a permanent feature of our democratic architecture. To a certain extent, Ireland has achieved this – most political parties now accept the significant role that citizens’ assemblies can play in major policy and constitutional challenges. The Brussels-Capital Region is leading the way with the first meetings of its permanent climate assembly taking place early in 2023. KNOCA was part of the design team of the Brussels assembly and will work with partners to make the case for further institutionalisation of climate assemblies at different levels of governance.

3. **Communicating climate assemblies.** If climate assemblies are to have an effect on wider public attitudes and support for their recommendations, then communication is key¹⁵. Only a few assemblies (Austria, France and Scotland, for example) have paid significant attention to communication and outreach to established and new media outlets and different societal stakeholders. Some have experimented with limited forms of wider public participation around the assembly. The guidance will help organisers and advocates to build more effective communication strategies recognising the need for different storylines at different stages of the assembly process.
4. **Selecting and presenting evidence.** Climate science is complicated and solutions to the climate crisis contested. How best to select and present evidence to a diverse body of citizens with very different learning styles and abilities? Curation of evidence within assemblies has not received sustained attention¹⁶. Guidance is needed on how evidence is selected, both in terms of who selects evidence and witnesses (organisers and/or knowledge committee) and according to which principles; the format that evidence should take, learning from climate communications specialists; and the role that witnesses should play in the process – from simply presenting evidence to co-designing and reviewing recommendations.
5. **Playbook for climate NGOs.** Climate NGOs are an untapped resource for advocacy and engagement with climate assemblies, but our earlier work shows low levels of understanding and a degree of scepticism amongst these groups (see Box 3). This playbook will help climate NGOs position themselves in relation to climate assemblies, highlighting different roles they can play within or outside the process – and before, during and after an assembly. It will answer the question of how NGOs can capitalise on the potential of the climate assemblies to enable more robust, ambitious and equitable climate policy¹⁷.

The next iteration of this report will provide an update on emerging learnings from these and other knowledge development projects that are at the cutting edge of contemporary climate assembly practice.

15 KNOCA workshop on communicating climate assemblies <https://knoqa.eu/workshop-on-communicating-climate-assemblies-lessons-challenges/>

16 KNOCA workshop on evidence in climate assemblies <https://knoqa.eu/workshop-on-evidence-in-climate-assemblies/>

17 Workshop on NGO playbook: why and how should NGOs engage with climate assemblies? <https://knoqa.eu/event/workshop-on-ngo-playbook-why-and-how-should-climate-ngos-engage-with-climate-assemblies/>

Shaping future practice

KNOCA's raison d'être is to improve the commissioning, design, implementation, follow-up and evaluation of climate assemblies to secure more robust and legitimate climate policy and governance. The guidance that we are producing and the workshops and learning calls that we are hosting on different aspects of climate assembly practice all contribute to shaping future practice. We have been encouraged to learn that this guidance and events have helped organisers, practitioners and advocates improve their practices across Europe and beyond.

These public activities are complemented by closed sessions with governments, parliaments and civil society actors to help them develop assembly projects. One of the powerful elements of our network is that we are able to curate closed workshops that enable peer-to-peer learning, where policy officials, practitioners and activists meet others from the same background who have trod the path before them and can provide first-hand knowledge and experience.

Such sessions are time consuming to organise but incredibly rewarding and valuable in diffusing learning across space and time. One anecdote from these sessions: often public officials who have organised climate assemblies speak about how challenging and difficult a process it can be, but always when asked say that they would happily do it again – learning from their mistakes of course!

A call to action

The urgency of mitigating and adapting to climate change is undeniable. Our current political climate makes it clear that we need to do this in ways that draw on the imagination and creativity of citizens. Climate assemblies can make this happen.

Climate assemblies are a promising development in climate governance. While the impacts of, and learnings from, the first wave of assemblies continue to ripple through the system, we have enough understanding of this new form of public participation and deliberation to know that, under the right conditions, they can have significant impact on climate policy and governance. To ensure their promise is fulfilled, we must ensure that the next wave of climate assemblies is *designed with impact*. This is KNOCA's mission.

KNOCA and the European Climate Foundation are open to working with others who share their commitment to co-designing and co-producing the necessary guidance and support to ensure the impact of the next wave of climate assemblies. **Find us at knoqa.eu**