

Citizens and the climate: Towards innovative decision-making in public climate policies?

Climate change and the erosion of democracy: the interconnection of challenges

The two main crises of the 21st century are the erosion of democratic norms and freedoms and climate change (IPCC, 2023; International IDEA, 2023). As the impacts of climate change on people, nature and societies intensify and become more visible, the level of social and economic insecurity that people experience increases, which in turn impacts democratic institutions negatively. The interlinkages between the two crises could lead to renewed democratic engagement and infuse dynamism, innovation and robust social mandates on how societies do climate policy. Under certain conditions, innovative frameworks for democratic dialogue and new mechanisms for citizen participation could offer opportunities to engage citizens in in-depth consultation, and deliberation

on climate action, create consensus on climate policy choices and allow co-construction of shared pathways for communities towards net zero societies.

In that context, citizen assemblies are a new approach to climate policymaking, benefiting from the growing popularity of governments and civil society organisations globally (Mejia, 2023). They typically use random selection and sortition to bring together a diverse and representative group of citizens selected by democratic lottery to learn, deliberate and agree on recommendations. The research suggests that climate adaptation and resilience in particular can benefit from community deliberation since formulating sustainable climate adaptation policies requires not only technical interventions but also a community-owned deliberation of shared priorities. What are the main lessons learnt from deliberative practices?

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Promises and first lessons learnt from the deliberative wave on climate in the Global North

Citizens' assemblies and deliberative practices, although they have been experiencing a revival of interest for several decades, have very ancient roots on all continent (from Athenian democracy to precolonial assemblies in the global South). The study summarized here focused on recent practices with a particular interest in assemblies that debate the impacts of climate change and strategies to address them. Among those analyzed mostly in the Global North, while the elements for successful climate assemblies may vary according to the goals of the assembly, four main broad sets of learnings come across strongly:

- **Everyday citizens can bring valuable perspectives and local knowledge to the table**

Everyday citizens can bring new ways of approaching problems and articulating solutions that are more attuned to their interests, needs and attitudes. Citizen participation can reveal public support for more ambitious climate action than politicians may have anticipated. The rationale behind such an effect is that the broader support can empower leaders to take bolder steps while decreasing the risk of policy capture by undue influence or lobbyism by, for example, fossil fuel industry or other corporate interests. When citizens are involved in considering complex trade-offs and arriving at shared solutions, it can foster public acceptance and legitimacy for more ambitious climate policies. The climate assemblies tend to be more willing to confront tough choices than governments and propose reducing consumption or regulating businesses. This was for instance the case for the *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* held in France in 2021, where citizens proposed a ban on domestic flights for routes where trains provide a viable alternative.

Bringing citizens from across the political spectrum together to deliberate on the common good can help bridge divides and find common ground on climate action. While not immune to the risks of polarization among citizens, the space for deliberation created by citizen assemblies has been found to work well even in societies marked by high degrees of inequality and polarization contributing to creating space for deliberation in polarized societies and transforming protest.

- **Broader political context and power dynamics are influential and need to be taken into account**

Since spaces for citizen deliberation exist in quite a few countries already, there is a need to localize and connect new forms of citizen deliberative practices such as climate assemblies with established local institutions for deliberation or with Indigenous traditions (in either claimed or invited spaces for deliberation). As democratic innovations and citizen participation tools, climate assemblies have to balance the need to be embedded in the political contexts in which they occur with retaining the capacity to challenge unequal power relations that undermine climate action. In practice,

how much the policy input and proposed solutions are considered depends to a large degree on the political context and power dynamics in which the climate assembly takes place.

Climate assemblies need to be located and understood within the broader political context, from the constitutional provisions for the institution of citizen deliberation to the specific challenges and limitations faced by citizen deliberation in weak democracies, hybrid regimes or under authoritarian rule. The research on the role or impact of citizen deliberation under different regime types is not conclusive.

- **Regardless of their results, climate assemblies strengthen the deliberative culture in itself**

Under certain preconditions, climate assemblies have the potential to engage a wider public in discussions about climate challenges and solutions that address social and climate injustices. Using sortition and random selection to pick assembly members, their composition by design allows those most vulnerable to climate change and those currently excluded from policy discussions to have a voice in formulating climate policy.

Investments in climate assemblies can be seen as deliberative capacity-building tools in the broader climate governance architecture. While no panacea for weak democratic institutions, climate assemblies have the potential to strengthen the capacity of communities to collectively resist disinformation and resolve civic conflict and deep divisions, as such factors can otherwise undermine democratic transitions or consolidation. By going beyond supporting specific one-off instances of citizen deliberation to instead foster communities of practice with all actors involved in the climate assembly process, the chances to learn and improve future deliberative practices will increase. Citizens participating in assemblies tend to build communicative skills to handle climate-related conflicts, a critical asset to climate-vulnerable countries in the Global South. By considering trade-offs, generating informed opinions, and co-creating solutions, citizens become more empowered and confident in addressing climate change. This fosters a more informed and politically engaged citizenry.

- **Measuring the impacts of a climate assembly is not always easy and may be subject to debate**

The research envisages main four types of impact of climate assemblies: on public policy, on policy actors and institutions, on public discourse and on the participants. Their combination makes their potential inspiring and powerful yet also challenging to measure.

Depending on what the remit of the citizen assembly is, measuring its impact can be difficult, not least since policy change is a gradual and non-linear process where isolating and measuring the specific contribution of the climate assembly is difficult. It is key to establish a clear and well-defined purpose and impact criteria early in the process. This ensures the assembly tackles the right issues, responds to genuine climate policy needs and delivers relevant recommendations. Seeing

the recommendations of the climate assembly providing meaningful and timely input to climate policymaking can strengthen its legitimacy, both among assembly members and the public.

Observers of climate assemblies often track how the recommendations impact government policy, on the assumption that a commissioning and funding public authority has an interest in seeing the assembly influence its decision-making. Indeed, political buy-in from the start is another key starting point. From the beginning, it is pivotal to foster constructive relationships with the policymakers receiving the assembly report and build stakeholder buy-in in the process. It is important to consider how citizen deliberation tends to produce different policy recommendations than the existing political processes. This means thinking about the willingness of policymakers to adopt the assembly's recommendations and share the powers of policy formulation and decision-making with the citizens forming the assembly.

In practice, recommendations from citizens' assemblies and similar processes are never adopted wholesale by the parliaments or governments initiating the assembly and receiving its recommendations. The research points to a mixed track record for climate assemblies in this regard, though there are several examples where the climate assemblies are recognized as having played a critical role in the change of climate policy (such as the Irish Citizens' Assembly 2016–2018).

To close the participation loop, the response from the public institution to the assembly's recommendations is decisive to ensure the continued trust of participants in the political system. Failure to respond to the recommendations risks increasing distrust in political institutions. The response from a public institution is critical for the climate assembly recommendations to be reflected in climate policy.

Climate deliberations in the Global South

The above learning could benefit to deliberative practices in the Global South. Indeed, there have been several ways of including citizens and communities in climate deliberation processes across different continents in the Global South, often rooted in local deliberation practices and based on legal frameworks such as constitutions (Datta, 2019). The shortcomings of such deliberative practices mainly relate to their institutional designs, which do not always ensure the inclusion and equality of voices from different genders, age groups, literacy skills or socio-economic marginalized people. Access to information in other formats than written texts can also increase the equal participation of all citizens, including those with little or no formal education.

Citizens' assemblies are faced with the tension of balancing the need to be embedded in the political contexts in which they occur, so as to generate legitimacy, while also disrupting the power relations that undermine climate action.

There are few emerging examples of climate assemblies in the Global South held for example in Brazil, Colombia, Maldives, India and Lebanon. While not numerous, they pave the way for increased use and understanding of

innovative deliberative practices in new locations and propose responses to the limitations and challenges of climate deliberation. Examples below portray citizen deliberation practices, which benefit from an institutional and political context keen to enrich public action by the outcomes of the deliberation. The Itinerant Citizens' Assembly in Bogotá was organized by the Council of Bogotá between 2020 and 2023, three interconnected citizen assemblies focused on locally relevant issues such as environment and environmental services, environmental services for cities, mobility, public space and land use. The first assembly engaged 110 people in public deliberation and submitted a report to the government identifying 30 challenges and 34 proposals.

In Brazil, Climate Assembly was held in November and December 2022 in Salvador, with 40 citizens participating in the assembly, being asked to study and make recommendations to the Salvador Municipality about priority areas in the Municipal Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation Plan. Possible scenarios were presented considering both climate mitigation and climate adaptation. The Citizen Assembly members finalized a report with recommendations that were shared with the City Hall and formed the basis for drafting a bill to be sent to the City Council.

Looking towards the future: What's next?

Building a learning culture around practices of climate deliberation

The study pointed out that more systematic knowledge about how, when and to what effect climate assemblies are used is central to creating an evidence-based platform for using them more frequently and piloting them in new locations. There is a need for commissioners to trace and better account for the impacts of climate assemblies and learn more systematically from their experience. The evaluation framework developed by the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) presents a useful conceptual overview of the types of impact to track and the methodology for such an undertaking.

Regional networks and centres of excellence could take a leading role in this endeavour. They can allow the sharing of knowledge and expertise within the Global South to lower costs, build capacity and disseminate lessons learned and findings about the role of climate assemblies to government officials, NGOs, and international networks.

Long-term horizon

Most assemblies held in the Global North to date have been *ad hoc* processes, commissioned by governments. In the short term, this will likely remain the most common approach. Two developments suggest alternative directions from the *ad hoc* processes of most climate assemblies – permanent assemblies such as the cities of Brussels and Milan – and assemblies commissioned by civil society such as the world's first Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis held in 2021. These two developments sit within a broader set of concerns about how assemblies are best integrated within the broader democratic ecosystem aiming for the same end goal: contributing to the rebuilding of democratic climate governance.

In conclusion

Innovative deliberation tools such as climate assemblies present a promising way to combine climate-impactful governance with renewed democratic practices based on bottom-up and citizen-driven recommendations and solutions.

While citizen assemblies and other forms of deliberative mini-publics are not the only ways to engage citizens, nor the unique solution to render climate governance citizens-led, growing experiences from across the world tend to constitute a solid track record about how to plan, lead and implement such exercises in various contexts, so that they can respond to the specificity of each exercise while addressing the common challenge that climate change represents to communities, cities and countries.

This QDD is a synthesis of a study by International IDEA: “Deliberative Democracy and Climate Change; Exploring the Potential of Climate Assemblies in the Global South”, commissioned by AFD and available [here](#).

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