CLIMATE ASSEMBLIES – KEY FEATURES

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NOTE: This is the first public version of this document. The Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) would appreciate feedback on how it could be improved, both in terms of structure and content. Please provide thoughts via info@knoca.eu.

KNOCA is a new European network for sharing best practice on the design and implementation of climate assemblies. The network will host events and produce a range of practical resources, as well as coordinating research activities. We welcome individuals and organisations with experience or interest in either commissioning, running or analysing these processes and their outputs in Europe. Please reach out to us to share, discuss and inform best practice and new developments in climate assembly design, delivery and analysis.

What is a climate assembly?

A climate assembly brings together randomly-selected everyday people to learn, deliberate and make recommendations on aspects of the climate crisis.

The term "climate assembly" is used in different ways and bodies with titles such as citizens' assemblies, citizens' juries and consensus conferences have similar features.

KNOCA is initially using the term "climate assemblies" in a broad sense to include any participatory process that combines random selection, deliberation and decision making on climate issues.

Climate assemblies share a number of key features (Table 1), although, as this report shows, how these characteristics are realised in practice differs.

Table 1. Characteristics of Climate Assemblies

- Purpose	- Duration	- Final report
- Commissioning	- Structure	- Communication
- Task	- Facilitation	- Oversight of official response
- Commitment to respond	- Evidence base	- Impact
- Governance	- Developing recommendations	- Evaluation
- Delivery bodies	- Decision making	- Budget
- Participant recruitment		

The report draws primarily on the experience of 7 national-level climate assemblies, summaries of which can be found under "National Climate Assemblies" on the KNOCA website
- The Irish Citizens' Assembly 2016-2018
- La Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (CCC) in France,
- Climate Assembly UK (CAUK),
- Scotland's Climate Assembly
- Danish Climate Assembly
- Finland's Citizens' Jury on Climate Action
- German Climate Assembly

Where relevant, practice from sub-national assemblies is considered. Information on the Jersey Citizens' Jury on Climate Change will be added in the next version.

Purpose

Climate assemblies are organised for different reasons. Most assemblies have been organised to contribute to the development of climate mitigation policy, although the model is suitable for consideration of adaptation policy and strategy.

Assemblies have typically been commissioned to generate policy proposals. However, they can be used at other points in the policy cycle – for example to scrutinise proposals. Finland's Citizens' Jury is an example of a scrutiny body which appraised 14 government policy proposals.

The degree of empowerment of assemblies varies. The French CCC was empowered to develop proposals to submit to a referendum, vote in parliament or direct regulatory application.

Most assemblies are more explicitly consultative in nature. They provide recommendations to public authorities. The primary purpose tends to be to inform government policy, although CAUK 's primary objective was to inform parliamentary scrutiny of government policy and the civil society-led German CA to put pressure on government to take more stringent action on climate in line with Paris Agreement obligations.

Polish practice is an outlier: municipal citizens' assemblies have been empowered to make policy and law. Mayors agree to implement any decisions that receive more than 80% support amongst assembly members.

Commissioning

Climate assemblies are typically commissioned (or sponsored) by public authorities at different levels of governance. This is typically the executive (e.g. President Macron for the CCC; government for the Danish CA), although the Irish CA was established by parliament and the CAUK by six parliamentary select committees.

The German CA is unusual in that it was commissioned by the civil society organisation Bürgerbegehren Klimaschutz.

Task

Climate assemblies work on a particular task that frames their learning, deliberation and recommendations. Ensuring a clear and answerable question is critical if an assembly is to function effectively.

The tasks of climate assemblies have tended to be quite similar, asking a broad question about climate policy and focusing primarily on mitigation.

The French CCC and CAUK were asked questions about achieving set reductions of greenhouse gas emissions. In the UK, to achieve its legislative commitments: "How can the UK reduce greenhouse gas emissions to net zero by 2050?". In France the reduction target was explicitly linked to social justice: "How to reduce greenhouse gases by at least 40% by 2030 (compared to 1990) in a spirit of social justice".

The Irish CA asked an even more general question: "How can the State make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change?"

The Scottish CA task potentially opened up broader issues of social change and adaptation: "How should Scotland change to tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way?".

A second difference with the Scottish question is how it was decided. In all the other assemblies, the commissioning body set the overarching task. In Scotland, the question was decided through a facilitated deliberative process in the Stewarding Group (see governance arrangements), with the Group asked to bear in mind Scotland's legislative commitments.

Commitment to respond

The commissioning body generally makes a public statement when establishing the assembly as to how it will respond to the recommendations. This will typically include a time frame within which it will consider the assembly's report and provide a public response to how it will deal with recommendations.

When establishing the CCC, President Macron stated that there would be "no filter" to the transmission of the recommendations to the Parliament (law), to the general population (referendum) or for direct regulatory application. This commitment helped raise the profile of the Convention, although different interpretations emerged as to what "no filter" means in practice (see impact).

In Ireland, Parliament committed to consider the recommendations of the assembly through a joint committee of both Houses. In the UK, chairs of select committees committed to use the CAUK recommendations to shape future committee inquiries.

Governance

Climate assemblies need to put robust governance arrangements in place to ensure that they are seen as independent from the commissioning body and other vested interests. Different forms of governance have emerged – in Ireland and Scotland seconded civil servants played a central role; in France an independent Governance Committee was appointed; and in the UK and Denmark, the delivery body (see next section) took on significant governance responsibilities in close collaboration with public officials.

The model of the Irish CA has been adopted and further developed in Scotland. In Ireland, an independent chair, and in Scotland, joint chairs were appointed and a secretariat established consisting of seconded civil servants. A steering or stewarding group was then appointed by the secretariat, constituted by representatives of different interests potentially affected by the assembly and specialists in democratic engagement. A second body, an expert advisory group, provided technical expertise on aspects of climate change. Once the assembly was up-and-running, a members' reference group was established to ensure input into governance from the members of the assembly.

In France, President Macron passed responsibility to host and organise the CCC to the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC). A Governance Committee was established, with 15 people with different types of expertise (climate, economy and society, participatory democracy) appointed by the Environment Minister, plus two rotating members of the Convention. Three independent guarantors were appointed by ESEC and the two chambers of the French parliament to provide oversight of the process.

In Denmark and the UK, much more responsibility for governance was placed in the hands of the delivery organisation – Danish Board of Technology in Denmark, Involve in the UK. In Denmark, the process was overseen by the two lead facilitators from DBT, the lead civil servant from the Environment ministry and 5 citizens randomly selected from the Assembly. In the UK, Involve held regular meetings with the chairs of the parliamentary committee that had commissioned the assembly and worked with four expert leads who had technical expertise in different aspects of climate change and an advisory board that provided independent oversight and advice on aspects of design.

In Poland, a formalised model of arbitration has been developed to deal with any conflicts that may emerge between different governance actors.

Delivery organisations

Delivery organisations are independent organisations with expertise in the design and facilitation of participatory and deliberative processes, recruitment and public communications. They are generally appointed through a tender process by the commissioning body or its alternate. As the section above indicates, delivery organisations have played a significant role in governance arrangements in some assemblies and so the nature of the tender process will differ.

In the UK, the tender process was run by clerks of the parliamentary committees, in Denmark by the government ministry, in France by the Governance Committee and in Ireland and Scotland by the Secretariat. The German case differs because it was the commissioning civil society organisation that put out the tender.

The structure of the tenders in the Denmark and the UK gave the delivery organisations significant control over design and facilitation. The delivery organisations in the UK were also responsible for recruitment, whereas this was undertaken by the Statistics Agency in Denmark.

In other assemblies, the delivery organisation has worked more closely with the governance committee or secretariat to co-design the process, but has been responsible for facilitation of the assembly. For example, in France, the Governance Committee established the parameters of the CCC, leaving the delivery organisations, Missions Publiques and Res Publica to design the specifics and facilitation of the sessions. In Scotland, Involve and the Democratic Society worked closely with the Secretariat in designing the process, with the two delivery bodies taking responsibility for facilitation during the sessions.

Participant recruitment

The aim of assemblies is to recruit and retain members who reflect a diversity of characteristics of the broader society from which they are drawn. This is the reason why citizens' assemblies are referred to as "mini-publics". The recruitment process is resource intensive (both in terms of finance and time) to ensure a robust process of random selection and attendance by the people selected.

While the term "citizen" is used in the title of citizens' assemblies and juries, the constituency tends to be all residents. The French assembly included members from overseas territories.

Climate assemblies typically aim to engage larger numbers: between 99 (Ireland) to 150 (France) in the national assemblies. The outlier is Finland which was a smaller process, involving less than 40 participants. Local climate assemblies typically recruit around 40 to 50 participants, with citizens' juries often smaller in scale.

The selection process favoured by most recent citizens' assemblies is some form of civic lottery. This is a two-stage process.

In the first stage, an invitation letter is sent to a random selection of thousands of households or individuals or random phone numbers are selected. Using letters enables organisers to target particular localities where response rates are known to be low – this approach was taken in CAUK and in Scotland. Respondents who are interested in participating provide basic information about themselves.

In the second stage, members of the assembly are selected using a stratified random sampling process from the pool of volunteers who accepted the invitation. Criteria from the information collected in stage 1 are applied to ensure that members reflect the broader population in terms of these characteristics. The selection criteria used to ensure members reflect key characteristics of the broader population, generally including: age; gender; education, income and/or employment; geography, including urban/rural. Ethnicity (CAUK, Scotland) and disability (Scotland) have also been applied. CAUK and Scotland's CA applied a measure of attitude to climate change to ensure that members reflected the diversity of perspectives within their populations.

Ireland uses a different approach. A market research company approaches randomly selected households to recruit members of the assembly using a set of criteria. Some concerns have been raised about the extent to which this process is as robust as the civic lottery.

Generally, assemblies will recruit substitutes to replace members who do not turn up or drop out. Decisions have to be made as to how far in the process replacements can be included – in France new members were added up to Session 4. Most other assemblies have an earlier cut-off point.

Significant resources are required to ensure that those individuals selected attend the assembly. For face-to-face assemblies, this includes arranging their travel and accommodation as well as providing other logistical and personal support that is needed (e.g. caring responsibilities, translation, signing, etc.). For online assemblies, resources need to be targeted to overcome aspects of the digital divide, ranging from access to equipment and the internet through to competence and confidence.

Many assemblies pay an honorarium to recognise the civic work of participants – and to incentivise the engagement of those who may not otherwise participate. The Irish CA did not use an honorarium and suffered higher levels of drop-off during the life of the assembly (which covered more issues than climate change). Other assemblies, in particular CAUK and Scotland had impressively high retention rates. The Danish CA had quite significant drop-off, in part because members had originally been invited to a face-to-face assembly, which then became an online process in the wake of Covid-19. In the UK and France, a number of sessions had been in person before online sessions; Scotland's CA was designed to be fully online and this was made clear in the recruitment.

Duration

Most of the climate assemblies have been "one-off" initiatives. Denmark's climate assembly has two phases – the second phase has yet to be designed at the time of writing. It is possible that climate assemblies will become an established part of the annual Danish climate planning process. Whether and how climate (and other citizens') assemblies can become a more institutionalised part of the political system is a topic of heated debate amongst practitioners and academics in this field.

Climate assemblies need to be given enough time to deal with the task they have been asked to consider. Typically, national assemblies take place over a number of weekends, although the Danish CA combined full weekend and evening sessions; the German CA is evenings only. Local assemblies vary in their design.

Because of Covid-19, assemblies have gone online and organisers have had to re-consider how to arrange working patterns – long and intensive face-to-face weekends are more difficult to replicate online.

It is difficult to judge precisely how much time is needed for a CA to do its work effectively. The OECD recommends at least 40 hours, but much will depend on the scope of its task and the expectations in terms of

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output – whether the Assembly is asked to craft its own recommendations or review existing proposals (see "developing recommendations").

In recognition of the complexity of climate change, a number of assemblies have been quite long. The French and Scotland's CA have been the most extensive: 7 in-person weekend sessions and one online weekend for the CCC, plus an additional weekend to review the response by government and parliament (see "oversight of official response"); 7 full weekends online in Scotland.

The Irish and Finnish CAs spent the least time on the topic – two full weekends in Ireland. This is quite a limited timeframe given that the same assembly had 5 weekends to tackle the constitutional status of abortion. The two-weekend model that has been widely adopted by many local authorities, typically because of the costs of longer processes.

In almost all CAs, members have wanted more time. In a couple of cases – France and Scotland – an extra weekend was added at the request of members.

Structure

Assemblies need to be organised so that they make best use of the time available to respond to the task. In a number of assemblies, this has involved breaking the assembly into workstreams to deal with different aspects of climate policy. This can be seen as an indication that more than one assembly may be needed to deal with this complex policy area.

The Irish assembly is unusual in its structure in that the whole assembly considered the same issues over the two weekends it spent on climate change policy. Compared to other climate assemblies, it did not have much time to learn, deliberate and come to recommendations. The Finnish Jury similarly worked as a single group throughout its lifetime.

In other assemblies, the members have learned about more general issues of climate change together and then broken into randomly-allocated workstreams. For example, CAUK learned about the science and ethics of climate change as a full group and developed a number of guiding principles before breaking into three workstreams: how we travel; in the home; what we buy, and land use, food and farming. The full assembly reconvened to consider where electricity comes from and greenhouse gas removals. The French CCC divided into five groups: transport; food; consumption; work and production; housing. Scotland broke into four workstreams: diet and lifestyle; homes and communities; work and travel.

Denmark is unusual in the autonomy granted to members to decide the relevant workstreams. In all the other assemblies, it is the designers of the process that have decided how to break climate change into topic areas. In Demark, this was decided through a brainstorming process after members of the assembly had learned about climate change and the challenges facing Denmark.

Facilitation

Two philosophies of facilitation have been used across assemblies: directive table facilitation and self-organisation by citizens. Debates amongst practitioners and academics continue as to the merits of these different facilitation styles.

Ireland, Scotland and UK adopted directive table facilitation. Small tables of members were guided by a facilitator who was responsible for ensuring they stay on task and fairness in proceedings (speaking time, etc.). The membership of different tables was regularly rotated.

In Denmark and France, more emphasis is placed on self-organisation by members. Groups are generally left to themselves to develop their own working patterns and divide responsibilities for developing different recommendations. Facilitators intervene where problems with group dynamics emerge.

Evidence base

The organisers of assemblies aim to ensure that members receive balanced information on the issues they are considering. An expert advisory group typically provides recommendations on the nature of relevant evidence and suitable witnesses. Witnesses may include scientists, policy experts, interest groups, politicians, as well as people with lived experience of the impacts of climate change. Close to 140 experts of different kinds gave evidence to the CCC.

The task set for the assembly informs the type of evidence and witness input that is necessary. For example, where the assembly is asked how to achieve a particular reduction in greenhouse gas emissions, assembly members need to hear from proponents of different approaches to realising that reduction.

Witnesses will typically give presentations either in person or through videos, with supporting written evidence, and will generally answer questions from members.

All assemblies begin with expert witnesses educating members on the nature of climate change and its impacts and, where relevant for the design, the workstream topics. Decisions on who the assembly should hear from in the early part of assemblies typically rests with the designers – for example, the Governance Committee in the French CCC; the expert leads in CAUK. The extent to which members are able to call their own witnesses varies according to design. For example, in Denmark, members were provided with lists of potential witnesses to select from. In all designs, an expert support group is needed to be able to respond to member's questions as they arise.

Typically, organisers are careful to ensure a clear distinction is drawn between the provision of evidence by experts and the role of citizens in deliberating and crafting recommendations (more below). In the French CCC, it appears that this distinction was less tightly drawn, with scientific, policy and legal experts working closely with members of the CCC in developing recommendations. In both Denmark and Scotland, experts reviewed proposals and provided feedback on how they might be redrafted to be more effective, but the decision on whether to adopt this advice rested with the member (see next section).

The Irish and French assemblies were both open to outside groups and individuals to offer ideas to the assembly through their dedicated websites. Summaries of this evidence was provided to members.

Developing recommendations

The output of assemblies is a set of recommendations. A distinction can be drawn between assemblies that engage in "policy development", where members are empowered to generate their own recommendations, and "policy appraisal", where members consider options or scenarios developed by government or experts. Final recommendations are generally decided by a vote.

In most of the national assemblies, members crafted their own proposals. How this was realised differs. The more open CCC provided opportunities for experts to work closely with members in the development of proposals. Other assemblies have been more structured to ensure that experts are only able to give their evidence and answer questions so that members are the sole authors of proposals.

In policy development assemblies, proposals are drafted by small groups of participants. Feedback mechanisms are put in place so that other members can learn about and offer suggestions to those drafting the proposals. In France, for example, on two occasions during the development of proposals, open sessions were organised where members could visit tables where the authors of proposals explained their ideas and proposals. A presentation and debate on the proposals of each thematic workstream was also organised in a plenary session. Similar processes were put in place in Scotland and Denmark.

In Denmark, two policy experts reviewed draft proposals, providing feedback on how they might be better worded to have impact on the political system. In France, legal experts helped redraft proposals so that they were in a suitable format to be considered as new laws, regulations or referendums.

CAUK adopted a different approach. For the policy areas it covered, the expert leads developed scenarios and policy options which the members considered in their deliberations and decision-making. Members primarily chose between different options offered by the expert leads, although they had the opportunity to add additional recommendations.

Finland's Citizens' Jury was asked to evaluate 14 policy proposals prepared by the Environment Ministry.

Decision-making

Assemblies need a process to confirm adoption of proposals as their final recommendations. These are often proposals that have been drafted by smaller groups of members. The process is generally a simple majority vote.

Apart from the Irish assembly, in all cases organisers have to consider how to deal with the issue that not all members have been involved in the development of all recommendations. CAUK is unusual in deciding that only the members who worked on specific workstreams should vote on those specific recommendations. The organisers

felt there was not enough time for everyone to hear and learn about the recommendations from other working groups. Where the whole assembly worked together on recommendations, all members of CAUK voted on them.

In other assemblies, time has been put aside for members to present and learn about the final recommendations from different workstreams before voting. The challenge here is that a majority of the members voting on particular recommendations will not have heard the evidence that informs the proposal.

Final reports

Reports will differ depending on whether the assembly engaged in policy development or appraisal. The former will generally be authored by the members themselves; the latter primarily by the lead delivery body, although with statements authored by the members. Typically, the level of support for each recommendation is provided.

The 459-page report of the CCC contains the 149 recommendations agreed by the Assembly in the form of draft referendums, laws and regulations.

The 556-page CAUK report not only contains the recommendations agreed by assembly members but also verbatim quotes that give an insight into the reasons members gave for supporting or opposing particular proposals collated from the table discussions.

Communication

Communication is critical to the transparency of climate assemblies. Assemblies typically have dedicated websites that explain the details of the process, in particular the evidence that has been provided to members. Plenary sessions and evidence presentations are generally livestreamed, with recordings and briefings made publicly available. The deliberations amongst members are generally private to ensure that they do not feel the pressure of the public gaze and to protect them from being targeted by interest groups. Some assembly websites include a portal where the public and interest groups can upload ideas and evidence.

The media and observers are typically given access to the assembly. The degree and form of access varies, with organisers taking different approaches to the protection of the identity of members.

The French CCC has been the most open of climate assemblies with a number of members engaging enthusiastically with the media. In comparison, other assemblies have been much more protective of members and limited the extent of media contact.

Assemblies have varied in their degree of outreach to the public. Scotland's CA has probably been the most active, particularly in its engagement with schools and the national youth parliament. It has included insights from this engagement in its interim and final reports.

Oversight of official response

One of the perceived weaknesses of the climate assembly model is the lack of oversight of the commissioning body once it receives the recommendations. Typically, the production of recommendations signals the end of the assembly process for members.

The French CCC and Scotland's CA have both recognised this weakness and instigated an additional session for members a few months after the government has received their reports. This enables the assembly to provide commentary on progress and exert political pressure. The CCC met 8 months after its report was received by President Macron and made a public statement in which members expressed their disappointment in the extent to which their recommendations had been adopted or modified

The CCC is again relatively unusual in the extent to which members have engaged with public authorities and taken a proactive stance to promote their recommendations. Members have been invited into official workshops on the implementation of proposals. A number of members also created the association Les 150 to raise the profile of the assembly and provide oversight of the extent of adoption of its proposals.

Impact

The primary purpose of climate assemblies has generally been to affect government policy - or in the case of CAUK, the capacity of parliamentarians to hold the government to account on its climate policy. In these terms, meaningful impact can be discerned.

It is too early to judge this form of impact across all the assemblies. In Ireland, the majority of recommendations of the assembly were adopted in a recognisable form by the joint parliamentary committee and have been included within the government climate action plan. Similarly, a non-negligible number of the proposals of the French CCC appear in the Climate and Resilience Bill currently being debated in parliament. The findings of CAUK have informed the launch of a number of parliamentary select committee inquiries. In all these cases, there is evidence that current climate policy and oversight is more progressive than it would likely have been without the assembly.

In all cases, however, we find public authorities being selective in the proposals they adopt. In Ireland, the controversial recommendation of an agriculture tax was dropped, with no explanation offered. In France, the CCC and Les 150 have criticised the extent to which many of its proposals have been watered down or ignored. In the UK, a general election before the report of CAUK meant that some of the chairs of select committees changed, with new chairs less committed to following up its recommendations.

Direct impact on policy processes is not the only impact that can be discerned. In the UK, for example, it is another public body – the influential Climate Change Committee – that has arguably responded most significantly to CAUK. The Committee's Sixth Carbon Budget draws on the findings of CAUK in modelling its expectations of government policy. Affecting the Committee's work is an unintended consequence, enabled in large part by the Director of the Committee being an expert lead for CAUK.

Another secondary impact is on the broader public. The French Convention distinguishes itself in this regard. A combination of profile afforded to the Convention by its very public sponsorship by President Macron, along with the openness of the process to the media means that the French public has high levels of awareness of the Convention process. It has been the subject of extensive media and public attention and debate, not least as to whether Macron has fulfilled his commitment for there to be "no filter" for the Convention proposals. The evidence suggests significant support amongst the public for the Convention's recommendations.

The level of recognition amongst the general public of other assemblies is more limited and, in some cases, almost non-existent.

While the primary purpose of climate assemblies has generally been to influence national climate policy, the extent to which they need to adopt strategies to ensure wider recognition and support amongst the public is an ongoing debate.

Budget

The budget of climate assemblies has varied radically. Without a suitable level of funding, the assembly will not be able to meet enough times or provide the necessary support to members.

The French, Irish and Scottish assemblies were fully funded by their respective government, with budgets over €1 million. The French provided the most generous funding of €5.5 million.

While CAUK received funding from the parliamentary committees, the majority of the budget was provided by Foundations; in Denmark, the Danish Board of Technology had to cover some of the costs of the process; in Finland two academic research centres covered much of the costs. This is not a sustainable approach in the long-term.

Evaluation

Ensuring robust and independent evaluation is the only way to secure systematic learning from assemblies so that practice can be improved. The national assemblies to date are early pioneers, so there is much to learn to enhanced the quality of future initiatives.

Scotland's Climate Assembly and CAUK commissioned formal university-led, independent evaluations. Both are yet to report.

The French Convention took a different approach. It accredited 40 researchers who were given access to the process. Similarly in Denmark, a number of academics have engaged with the process in different ways.

The more systematic evaluations tend to follow formats adopted by other citizens' assemblies, not on climate change. An issue that KNOCA intends to consider is whether additional evaluation criteria need to be added that relate to the content of the assemblies – for example, the capacity of members to engage with the complexity and long-term nature of the climate crisis.

Further details on climate assemblies

KNOCA aims to collate existing and future evaluations of climate assemblies and to commission its own research on different aspects of climate assembly practice. For the launch of KNOCA, four draft research briefings were commissioned that touch on various characteristics of climate assemblies, namely:

- The framing of climate change within climate assemblies
- The integration of climate assemblies into the policy process
- The legacy and impact of climate assemblies
- The legitimacy and resonance of climate assemblies in wider society

These briefings can be found under the "Research" section of the KNOCA website.