



# KNOCA

## Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies

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### HOW CAN THE LEGITIMACY AND RESONANCE OF CLIMATE ASSEMBLIES IN WIDER SOCIETY BE ENSURED?

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## 1. Key insights

- Climate assemblies (CAs) have much potential to bridge the widening gap between those who govern and those who are governed. They do not, however, provide a blanket solution to deficiencies in the democratic legitimacy of public institutions, such as low levels of trust in government. They may also fall short in giving the most vulnerable parts of the population an adequate voice in policymaking.
- The legitimacy of CAs result from:
  - i. representativeness, impartiality, and inclusivity within the deliberative process
  - ii. a governance structure that reflects thematic competence, procedural fairness, and efficiency
  - iii. an output that has the potential to respond to the needs of those who are or should be served by the respective policies under review
  - iv. a positive perception of the process among participating citizens, as well as the wider public (e.g., with respect to its fairness and quality).
- Visibility and publicity of CAs are critical for their resonance – the extent to which a CA captures the attention of external actors such the public and stakeholders. It is easier to attract attention to processes that are institutionalised, supported by the government and representatives of civil society and business interests.
- The legitimacy of CAs needs to be established by transparently integrating the assembly within the policymaking cycle. This involves clear linkages between the outputs and pending policy decisions, such as the commitment from the commissioning authority to respond to or act on participants' recommendations and to monitor and report on their status of implementation.
- Ensuring legitimacy of expert inputs, chosen to be presented to the participants, represents a key challenge for the commissioners and organizers of CAs. The same applies to defining what an independent and balanced representation of views means in practice with regard to climate change policy. Most critiques of past CAs focus on this aspect, yet existing literature on CAs offers little practical insight of how to design and structure adequate and convincing practices.
- Support for CAs and their outcomes tends to increase when the wider public believes that the participants hold similar views to their own and see participants as representatives of their views ("they are like me"). Thus, random selection of participants is key to CA's legitimacy and resonance.
- Ensuring legitimacy of the design and deliberation processes within CAs needs to be among the central considerations from the early stages of preparing the assembly. Specific measures to this end include an independent CA convener (e.g., the case in France and UK); random selection of members (if necessary, combined with an application of diversity criteria by demographics, economic and social backgrounds as practiced by all CAs) and diversity of attitudes towards climate change (e.g., UK, Scotland); and transparent procedures for selection of topics and expertise (e.g., all CAs used expert advisory committees).

- To include broader publics in their deliberations, the CAs in France and Ireland allowed for public submissions, while Scotland engaged with the Children’s Parliament and schools to provide additional input. The impact of additional channels such as live broadcasting and/or recordings of plenary sessions and expert inputs, observer sessions and more creative outputs such as documentaries (France, UK), TV shows, cartoons, and art exhibitions (France) remain to be assessed.

## **2. Recommendations**

- Devote particular attention to enhancing the legitimacy of expert input and ensuring a balanced representation of views including representatives of scientific, experiential, and tacit knowledge. The voices of affected persons and of controversial viewpoints should be incorporated into the process in addition to including scientific experts.
- Consider strategies to ensure that accurate information on the CA is available and easily accessible from the very outset. The objective here is to minimise the risk of misrepresentation of its work. At a minimum, a CA should have a well-organized website with the programme and schedule of the process, expert input, submissions by interest groups and members of the public, and ideally videos, audio recordings, or transcripts of the plenary sessions to assure transparency.
- Develop and implement an active strategy for media engagement, potentially including early awareness raising and education of the media on the topic to help generate greater interest and enable balanced and informed reporting.
- Develop and implement strategies to increase awareness, support of and, ideally, ownership over the process and its outcomes among a diversity of policy actors. These may range from the CA being directly commissioned by powerful institutions (e.g., launched by parliament or government); creating clarity on the treatment of the CA’s outcomes in the policymaking process; and/or assigning roles to policy actors during the assembly. Outreach to the main political parties and other major political stakeholders should be a key consideration in the overall process design.
- Consider designing additional forms of public engagement into the CA process to enhance resonance (attention and interest) in the political arena. This may include focus groups or round tables with individuals or groups that are not well represented or unlikely to be reached by a random selection process. This may help to provide a voice (empowerment) to those groups in society that have little or no influence on political discourse.
- Use creative and varying facilitation techniques to allow participants to take part beyond cognitive work and integrate artistic, experience-based and playful means of learning.
- Develop transparent processes to monitor the implementation of the CA’s recommendations to ensure political accountability and to enhance the breadth and strength of impact of the assembly and the resonance it creates in the wider public.
- Ensure that evaluation and research focus systematically on the perceived legitimacy of climate assemblies and not just their internal practices.

### **3. Background**

An ever-growing number of deliberative spaces such as citizens' assemblies, juries, planning cells, and deliberative polls, known collectively as "deliberative mini-publics" (DMPs), have emerged in an attempt to address deficits of legitimacy within government and representative institutions by including ordinary citizens in the decision-making process (Smith, 2009; Setälä, 2014; Setälä and Smith 2018). Climate assemblies (CAs) are one form of DMP that build on the tradition of citizens' assemblies. They are designed to bring informed citizen-perspectives into policymaking to generate or recommend policy options or social mandates. Hence a perception of a CA as legitimate among the general public and political actors is key for it achieving its main political objectives and for having resonance in the wider society.

Concerns are often raised as to whether CAs are representative of the wider population, to what extent they are suited or qualified to make policy recommendations or influence decisions. This is especially the case for complex issues related to climate change policy that are perceived as highly technical and requiring specialised knowledge. CAs need to combine the elements of epistemic competency and democratic inclusiveness in order to enhance the legitimacy of policy-making. For this to be achieved, publicity and resonance beyond the narrow circle of actors engaged in respective CAs is indispensable.

Capturing public interest in CAs is challenging because it depends not only on their features and communication strategies deployed, but also on a number of external factors, including the openness for such democratic innovations within the public, the political system, and the media. An important factor for the resonance of CAs is how the key political and societal actors communicate about them, as well as on the overall linkage between the assembly's outcomes and the political process. The potential of CAs may also be impacted by the overall state of political consensus in a given country, public support for climate action, and the stage of the climate policy cycle – e.g., a country that has already established a framework climate policy, with an ambitious emission target, is different from a case where targets have not been set and policies are less developed. Although these contextual elements are hard to control, they need to be taken into consideration in the strategy, process-design, and implementation of a CA at its outset. Learning from experiences elsewhere is necessary to better navigate challenges and to understand the opportunities and risks related to respective design choices.

In the following sections we highlight the key learnings from the academic debate about the legitimacy and resonance of DMPs and explore how some of these issues were addressed by the recent CAs in Denmark, France, Ireland, Scotland, and UK. The analysis is based on a desk review of the literature, a rapid review of published materials and web resources of CAs in Denmark, France, Ireland, Scotland, and the UK, as well as 5 exploratory semi-structured interviews with CA organizers and experts that provided input into the assemblies from these jurisdictions.

### **4. Current knowledge**

This section introduces the different ways that legitimacy and resonance are understood from an academic perspective and offers a review of the available literature on the legitimacy and resonance of DMPs.

#### 4.1 Legitimacy

Legitimacy is a highly contested concept in political science. The legitimacy of DMPs like climate assemblies can be thought of in at least two ways: what academics term normative and empirical legitimacy<sup>1</sup>. Normative legitimacy asks whether the authority of a DMP is justified; “whether there are good reasons why it should have the right to make the decisions it does” (Bodansky, 2008, p. 709). Typically, such judgements are based on appeals to democratic principles and ideals (Smith, 2009). These might include consideration of the representativeness of the randomly-selected group of citizens; comprehensiveness and accuracy of the knowledge base of deliberation, as well as the quality of the deliberation itself (Mansbridge, 2019). The second way of understanding legitimacy is empirical (also known as popular, descriptive or sociological legitimacy). Empirical accounts of legitimacy concentrate on how a deliberative process is actually perceived (Pow, 2021), either by the randomly-selected group of participants (internal legitimacy) or by the wider population or communities who might be affected by its effects (external legitimacy) (Jacobs, Kaufmann, 2019). Empirical accounts of legitimacy often rest on judgements about whether a given process is considered fair and of high quality (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2019; Mansbridge, 2019). Here, it is of central concern “whether, as a factual matter, an institution's authority is accepted by those whom it purports to govern (...)—whether it has de facto or ‘popular’ legitimacy” (Bodansky, 2012, p.709).

In practice, normative and empirical accounts of legitimacy are closely related. On the one hand, what people acknowledge as legitimate corresponds with their view about what is normatively justified (Bodansky, 2008). On the other hand, “the more embedded these institutions are in the state, the greater must be their normative and perceived legitimacy” (Mansbridge, 2019, p.119).

#### 4.2 The legitimacy of DMPs

A common way of analysing the legitimacy of institutions is through the analysis of three characteristics: input, throughput/process, and output (Schmidt, 2012; Galais et al 2021; Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2017; 2018; Scharpf, 2003). Input refers to the conditions and context that shape the engagement process, for example, who participates and the intended task; throughput/process refers to the internal dynamics and interactions between participants; output refers to the effects or impact of an institution, ranging from policy formulation and implementation to public acceptance.

The input-throughput/process-output model is useful for identifying characteristics of DMPs that can affect judgements of legitimacy of DMPs:

- Input legitimacy in DMPs focuses on who participates, topics that are discussed and access to information (Harris, 2019, p.48). Since it is not possible for all citizens to engage in deliberation, the selection process needs to be sensitive to the variety of opinions, ideas and backgrounds present in the broader public (Devillers et al., 2020, p.5, Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2017).
- Throughput/process legitimacy in DMPs refers to the very processes of participation, its rules of decision-making and contextual independence (Harris, 2019, p.48). It assesses accountability,

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<sup>1</sup> For a sense of the academic debates on aspects of normative and empirical legitimacy, see Schmidt, 2013; Heywood, 2013; Mansbridge 2020; Bodansky, 2008; Lauth, 2020.

transparency, openness, and inclusiveness (Schmidt & Wood, 2019) of the process. The presence of a professional facilitator, the independence of participants, and the provision of balanced information co-determine this kind of legitimacy (Ryan & Smith, 2014).

- Output legitimacy in DMPs examines the “political uptake of the recommendation(s); feedback loops between the ‘empowered space’ and the mini-public; and social uptake of the process” (Harris, 2019, p.48). It assesses the relationship between decisions taken during the process and policy outcomes, and whether the process responds to the problems of different publics (Strebel et al. 2019; Scharpf, 2003; Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2017; Jacquet et al., 2016).

The literature on the legitimacy of DMPs tends to focus attention on two broad themes: the representativeness and inclusiveness of mini-publics; and outputs and policy outcomes.

#### *4.2.1 Representativeness and inclusion*

The democratic legitimacy of CAs depends to a great extent on whether the “small scale deliberation (the micro) can be meaningfully related to the public spaces of mass democracy (the macro)” (Olsen & Trenz, 2016, p. 663). Assumptions of the representativeness and inclusiveness of the selection process have become critical to claims of the legitimacy of deliberative processes (Pow, 2021).

Measures to ensure input legitimacy of CAs often rely on achieving representativeness through the randomized selection of lay citizens (OECD, 2020). However, randomized selection does not always result in greater perceived legitimacy when compared to self-selection (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2019). Hybrid mechanisms of selection may help avoid diminishing legitimacy when interested citizens – not chosen via random selection – are excluded from the process of participation (ibid). Previous assessments have found that the legitimacy of a decision-making process is enhanced by including more citizens (i.e., mass participation) (Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2018; Jacobs, 2019). However, other scholars have warned that deviation from random selection can introduce systematic biases since adding participants in different ways defies the principle of giving each citizen an equal chance to be selected (Bryson et al., 2013; Benighaus & Renn, 2016; Bächtiger & Parkinson, 2019). In this context, some DMPs have introduced measures to involve the broader public in the assembly, for example through inviting public submissions or undertaking open Q&A sessions.

Another aspect of both normative and empirical (perceived) legitimacy is inclusiveness, which focuses on ensuring equality, diversity, and equity. This applies at the outset of the process, when participants are recruited, as well as during the process. In order to create inclusiveness at the outset, measures like stratified random selection which might include over-sampling of minorities and underrepresented groups can be applied to counter well-known self-selection bias in voluntary participation. Further, response rates can be raised through remuneration of expenses, and/or paying for childcare and eldercare to enable participants to take part (OECD, 2020). However, the inclusive character of random selection remains limited by the possibility to decline the invitation to deliberate (Jacquet, 2017) or to not participate during the process. Special support is often provided for under-represented and vulnerable communities within DMPs to encourage their participation. During the DMP process, much focus is placed on ensuring fairness through facilitation – to ensure that it is not just the most self-confident members who participate. Findings vary as to the extent to which facilitators are able to counteract embedded social inequalities

related to gender, ethnicity, etc. (Setälä and Smith, 2018). Furthermore, CAs can be supplemented and augmented by other forms and formats of deliberative participation, for example focus groups or round tables with selected individuals or groups that are not well represented or unlikely to be reached by a random selection process.

#### *4.2.2 Outputs and policy outcomes*

In judging output legitimacy, the extent of integration into the established policy-making structures and processes is key. Establishing a clear linkage to decision-making, by ex-ante securing the commitment from the commissioning authority to respond to or act on the assembly's recommendations, is critical. Similarly, political accountability can be provided by transparent monitoring of the status of the recommendations in the aftermath of the process (OECD, 2020). The quality of these ties with the political process determines the breadth and strength of the impact of the assembly and links to the resonance it creates in the wider public.

While CAs often realise high levels of input and throughput legitimacy by ensuring “good deliberation and equal participation” (Pogrebinschi & Ryan, 2018), a question is often raised to what extent DMPs can and should aim to help address broader democratic deficiencies, such as low levels of trust in public institutions and policies. The argument is commonly made that DMPs can improve the legitimacy of public decision-making, by increasing the legitimacy of proposed policies and enhancing, efficacy and trust (Fung, 2006; Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016; Ferejohn, 2008; Bächtiger et al., 2014; Boulianne, 2018; Setälä et al., 2010).

In Finland, for example, researchers found that participatory innovations could increase legitimacy of local government, subject to perceptions of procedural fairness and satisfaction with the outcomes (Jäske, 2019). Similarly, an assessment of four deliberative spaces found that a DMP can legitimise a government body or a policy-cycle, but only if the process of the assembly itself is considered legitimate (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps, 2016). However, a survey-based empirical study in Estonia points to a more complex picture where a participatory process led to increased trust in civil society, yet a decrease in trust in political institutions (Karlsson et al., 2018). The empirical evidence thus suggests that DMPs do not provide a blanket solution to addressing deficiencies in legitimacy of public institutions or policies.

A normative debate is raging as to the legitimacy of DMPs. While recognising the attractive characteristics of DMPs, critics and sceptics have raised concerns that they represent a “shortcut”, which undermines democratic control over decision-making because most people do not have an opportunity to participate in these processes (Lafont, 2020). Deliberation within DMPs may also sideline other forms of participation and deliberation, whether this is participatory processes that engage larger numbers or challenging governments via civil disobedience (Böcker, 2017; Habermas, 1996). There are also concerns that DMPs might be used inappropriately and instrumentally by governments in an attempt to generate legitimacy in decision making. This may well have a negative impact: “generalized use of mini-publics for political decision-making would diminish rather than increase the legitimacy of the deliberative system as a whole” (Lafont, 2015, p. 41). This suggests that enhancing legitimacy of climate change policy making would thus require focusing not only on internal and process features of DMPs themselves, but also on their relationship with other participatory spaces (e.g., counter-publics, or protest movements), as well as on the practices and intentions of the institutions whose legitimacy is directly affected by the deliberative processes

– e.g. the governmental institutions that are commissioning the assembly, the political institutions that are expected to act on the CA’s recommendations, etc..

### 4.3. Resonance

Resonance is a less common term within academic research. In this briefing, we use the term resonance to describe the extent to which an institution captures the attention and interest of external actors, such as members of the broader public or stakeholders. “Public resonance” is the way public audiences respond to other actors participating in the public sphere (Strydom, 2003).

#### 4.3.1 *The resonance of CAs*

The success of CAs is related to their public resonance. The perception that the broader public, political actors, and the media has of CAs, influences the chance of CAs becoming established as a legitimate part of the participatory policymaking ecosystem: “Robust legitimacy derives not only from appropriate delegation but from the design and the public presentation of the mini-publics themselves” (Mansbridge, 2019, p. 118).

#### 4.3.2 *Perceptions among participants and the broader public*

Perception and effects of CAs (and DMPs generally) can be analysed both with respect to the citizens directly involved, and the broader public that is not participating actively in the process. Most studies have focused on the internal dynamics of CAs and their effect on participating individuals (c.f. Kirby et al. 2021; Setälä et al., 2010). They suggest, for example, that being involved in a CA improves a person’s ability to participate in other political processes and augments overall trust that citizens can meaningfully engage in debating and solve complex issues (Farrell et al., 2019; Roberts & Escobar, 2015). However, a sole focus on participants of the assemblies is insufficient, not least because most CAs only include a relatively small number of citizens leaving the effect on the majority of non-participating citizens unexplored (Jacobs & Kaufmann, 2019), even more so if CAs “remain essentially ‘black boxes’” for the outside audience (Rummens, 2016, p. 138).

Some authors contend that DMPs and other deliberative processes “could transform not only their participants but also the larger public” (Gastil et al., 2012, pp. 214–215). For example, when surveyed on the “quality of judgments”, Oregon voters viewed the Oregon Citizens’ Initiative Review (a well-established DMP) as the most credible body (alongside criminal juries) compared to the state legislature and Congress (Warren & Gastil, 2015, pp. 570–571). Being informed about the view of a DMP can influence the opinions of ordinary citizens about policies. Early experimental research on the perceptions around citizens’ assemblies by the general public suggests that variations in the characteristics of the design and application of CAs – such as their size, and length of time spent deliberating – may influence their impact on public opinion, their perceived legitimacy and resonance (Boulianne, 2018).

A study on perceptions of CAs based on a survey of citizens in 15 European countries found that support for this form of public engagement was heterogeneous: it was strongest among those who



were less educated, had a lower sense of political competence, and who saw elites in a negative light (Pilet et al., 2020). Support for DMPs increased when respondents believed their fellow citizens held similar views to their own. Random selection of participants is a mechanism that helps other citizens to see participants as “like them”, and to consider mini-publics legitimate (Pow et al., 2020). A survey of attitudes towards a citizens’ assembly addressing a contentious constitutional question in Ireland, found that “like me” perceptions were a significant predictor of the perception of legitimacy, particularly when respondents perceived politicians to be unlike them (ibid). Similarly, analysis of the referendum exit poll on the recommendation from the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly (BCCA) on Electoral Reform provided early evidence that most voters who were aware of the Assembly were influenced by its judgments. Voters particularly appreciated the “ordinariness” of the BCCA - that it was made up of citizens from all walks of life - and were attracted by the expertise that assembly members gained (Cutler et al., 2008). A recent survey experiment suggests that these findings need to be tempered, providing evidence that partisan cues (e.g., level of support from political parties) towards the outcomes of DMPs may affect citizens’ support for the assemblies (Ingram and Levin, 2018). This suggests that outreach to key political parties and actors will be critical as part of communication strategies.

#### *4.3.3 The role of effective public communication*

Visibility and publicity of CAs are critical for their success: unless citizens in the wider public know of the existence of these processes, they are likely to have little or no effect (Jäske, 2019). Having experience with and access to information about DMPs plays an important role for raising citizens’ awareness (Goldberg, 2021). Studies show that it is easier to attract attention to processes that are already institutionalised and/or supported by the government, the media or interest groups, and provide resources for publicity work (Jäske, 2019; Gastil et al., 2018). However, there are several other elements at play. For example, the abandonment of a CA in Australia in 2010 shows that the highly polarised political debate and the lack of strong public support around climate change can create adverse conditions for a CA and lead to intense criticism of the process (Boswell et al., 2013). CAs are most likely to resonate in areas of “productive tension”, where existing antagonisms are not so deep as to make deliberation impossible (ibid). The criticism that greeted the failed Australian climate assembly stands in contrast to the resonance of the French Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (CCC). Polling conducted in the week following the final session of the CCC found that 70% of the French population had heard of the CA, and a poll by Odoxa showed that the French population supported most of the 149 proposals (Mellier & Wilson, 2020). In the case of CAUK, conducted at the same time, less political resonance led to less publicity (Mellier & Wilson, 2020).

For CAs to have an impact beyond those directly involved in them, public engagement needs to be designed into the process (Wells et al., 2021). Effective public communication enhances not only the public support for recommendations developed within a CA, but also the general acceptance for deliberative processes in policy making (OECD, 2020). Practical examples show that for best effects “an active effort to reach a wide range of citizens to increase awareness of the process and its purpose” (OECD, 2020, p.109) is needed. It is not enough to make information simply available (Wells et al., 2021). Effective overall communication strategy and execution of specific details (e.g., the proper design of invitations) may help convey the image of a CA as an important form of democracy and encourage citizens to engage (Gerwin, 2018, p. 44).

#### 4.3.4 Access to (information about) the process

There is a debate in the theory of deliberation on whether DMPs should be more open formats, which allow for intensive public scrutiny, or predominantly closed designs, which insulate participants from publicity (Chambers, 2005). In practice, DMPs tend to combine both approaches. On the one hand, they employ a range of opportunities for the public to witness the process: a well-organized website provided an overview of the programme and schedule of the process, videos of the expert inputs, and possibilities for submissions by interest groups and members of the public, audio recordings, or transcripts of plenary sessions (Farrell et al., 2019). On the other hand, the small group deliberations remain exclusive safe-spaces for the participants, are not recorded, and only allow observation to researchers.

An analysis of over 1100 submissions to the Irish climate assembly found that DMPs could be enlarged to become “midi-publics”, when written submissions of the public are integrated into the process design. This way a bridge between the mini-public and the broader population could be established (Devaney, Brereton et al., 2020; Devaney, Torney et al., 2020) to extend the resonance of the process. Nevertheless, transparency about the integration of the submissions into the process is pivotal, otherwise it can backfire and create a feeling of wasted effort by those who provided input, and dissatisfaction with, and critique of, the legitimacy of the process (ibid).

#### 4.3.5 Role of the media and of political actors

The broader public’s opinion and support for CAs is very likely to be influenced by opinions expressed by the media and political actors. Engagement by the media is considered essential for perceived legitimacy and resonance of democratic innovations. Escobar and Elstub (2017) observe, however, that “[n]ew democratic practices require new media narratives, and these may be prevented if mini-publics are covered using the tropes of traditional political reporting (i.e., ‘winners and losers’, ‘governing by focus group’, citizen involvement as an ‘abdication of responsibility’).” Similarly, Olsen and Trenz point to the risk that the media focus on polarisation, rather than the “consensus and common ground” that can emerge in a mini-public (Olsen & Trenz, 2014, p. 129). This points to the importance for CA organizers to have an active strategy for media engagement, potentially including early awareness raising and education of the media on the topic to help generate greater interest and enable more balanced and informed reporting. But it also points to the need for organisers to prepare for more partisan responses from some sectors of traditional and new media given that not all interests are supportive of democratic innovations like CAs.

Political actors and influencers play an important role in forming public opinion’s attitude towards CAs, as they attract much media attention and often serve as a point of reference for the broader public. Therefore, perceptions of CAs and their resonance among this group of actors is particularly important for ensuring resonance in the wider society.

Previous studies show that political resonance of the CAs may be impacted by the design of the assembly and its integration into policymaking processes. Publishing the recommendations of CAs, and policymakers’ responses to them, might be helpful to improve the resonance of these processes without undermining their autonomy (Krick 2021; Setälä, 2017). This highlights the need

for CA organizers to develop a strategy for engagement and outreach vis-à-vis key political actors and influencers.

## **5. How have climate assemblies addressed legitimacy and resonance?**

Even though the topics and task of CAs are comparable, the individual designs of assemblies vary. The precise definition of the remit, as well as unique contextual situations, lead to differences in the overall integration of the process into the policy cycle, its public and media engagement, and communication strategies. Core features like the random selection process for participants have been designed differently. The same applies to the evidence base or expert-knowledge that can be accessed by the participants. This variability is one of the core strengths of CAs and DMPs more generally since it allows sensitivity and fit to their respective contexts.

Given the variability in the design of CAs, this section explores the different ways questions of legitimacy and resonance have been addressed. Our discussion draws on an analysis of recent CAs, in particular 5 exploratory semi-structured interviews with organisers and experts of CAs in Denmark, France, Ireland, Scotland, and the UK.

### ***5.1 Governance, participants, and experts***

Legitimacy and resonance have been explicitly considered to differing degrees in relation to: (i) independence of the convening organisation; (ii) the selection process of the assembly members; and (iii) expert input through measures to balance the representation of points of view and the form of presentation.

Our interviews highlight that the legitimacy and independence of the convener was an important consideration in each CA, and was explicitly part of the public debate in France. Approaches to choosing the convener vary, with some CAs going for an independent third party (France, UK), and others keeping close involvement of the civil service (Denmark, Ireland, Scotland).

Representativeness and inclusiveness were carefully considered in the random selection of members with the application of a diversity of criteria related to demographics, economic and social backgrounds. The UK and Scotland assemblies explicitly considered the perceived legitimacy of the membership of the assembly when they added attitudes towards climate change as an additional criterion. This was to avoid criticisms that the assemblies were populated only by those concerned about climate change. To include broader publics into their deliberations, the CAs in France and Ireland allowed for public submissions. Scotland's decision to engage with the Children's Parliament and schools to provide additional input into the CA rested on the belief that the legitimacy of the process required consideration of the views of this more climate vulnerable demographic.

The conduct of the assembly was highlighted as a central concern for all of the organizers. In particular it was important to ensure that inputs were balanced, and experts were not driving the conclusions of the assembly towards a particular result. The Irish Citizens' Assembly took a particular approach in avoiding presentations from advocacy organisations: "A challenge was to provide impartial expertise through the choice of experts. The approach was to look purely for experts and not advocates, so they would not be seen as pushing their positions" (informant on the

Irish CA). Commenting on the UK's experience, our informant stressed: "It was our job to ensure legitimacy of the assembly by creating a transparent process with balanced representation of views. Even if you disagreed with the expert's views you had to let them give their input."

The CAs in Denmark, France, Ireland, Scotland, and the UK all aimed to establish transparent governance arrangements and procedures for selection of expertise. All set up advisory committees in different formats to support selection of the key topics and experts. Some had more elaborate governance (e.g., France set up 5 different bodies), while others relied on several nominated experts asked to manage the process. Yet all the assemblies faced some criticism from a limited group of stakeholders questioning the balance of presented expertise: "many civil servants remain sceptical about the CA and argue that citizens can be influenced by experts" (informant on CAUK). This highlights the need to adopt active strategies to enhance the perception of CA's legitimacy specifically among politicians and administrators, whether this is through targeted awareness building and outreach to key political actors, engaging high level champions to support the assembly, etc. Limited competencies and understanding about the characteristics of the CAs among policymakers may expose CAs to the risk of opponents undermining the process.

Independence and diversity of expertise is essential to an assembly's epistemic legitimacy. Further empirical research is required into the different approaches taken by CAs and how this links to the perceptions of legitimacy and resonance among political actors and broader publics.

## *5.2 Treatment of the outputs*

In our interviews, clarity around the way the CAs' outputs would be treated within the political process was raised as a key factor for legitimacy and resonance of climate assemblies by all informants. The French CA at the outset had direct support of the head of state, which gave the assembly a high political profile, enhanced its legitimacy, and sustained media interest early on. However, a significant number of its recommendations were eventually rejected or modified by the President and Parliament. This broke the promise made by President Macron that the recommendations would be treated "without filter". While this has a detrimental effect on normative assessments of output legitimacy, it led to increased media attention and public debate, arguably enhancing resonance across wider society. Several jurisdictions that are by no means legally responsible for implementing the Convention's measures have committed to doing so, which has also contributed to perceptions of legitimacy of the Convention and increased resonance of its outputs.

In the UK and Denmark, the pathway between the recommendations of the assemblies and political decision making was much less clear cut. CAUK provided its recommendations to the parliamentary select committees that had commissioned the assembly, some of which have used them as the basis for inquiries. However, the UK government has made no formal response. Again, in Denmark a parliamentary committee will consider the proposals of the CA, but it is not clear how they will affect climate policy planning. The lower levels of media attention may well relate to the lack of high-level political response and action.

A combination of the nature of the institution (e.g., government, parliament) commissioning an assembly, the commitments made to respond to its outputs, and the actual treatment of its recommendations, effects perceptions of legitimacy and broader resonance. These combined

effects are worthy of systematic research. Especially as the debate about different pragmatic forms of institutionalizing DMPs is developing (e.g. in Germany: see Lietzmann et al. 2021).

### *5.3 Broader political context and controversies*

Broader political context was highlighted in our interviews as another important factor for perceptions of legitimacy and public attention devoted to the climate assemblies. In France, the desire of the population to gain greater control over decision-making, pre-existing positive attitudes towards CAs, pressure from NGOs and a strong social movement on inequality have supported public interest in the Convention and strengthened its legitimacy and resonance. This contrasts with the experience of Denmark where the CA was introduced “against the backdrop of generally low understanding among the politicians and the public of the concept of citizens’ assembly” (Danish informant).

Interesting examples emerge on the linkages between broader public opinion and the perceptions of legitimacy of CAs. In Ireland, high prominence of the debate on legalisation of abortion, which was the primary initial focus of the Citizens’ Assembly 2016-2018, has helped to raise attention to its deliberations on climate change. When a national referendum on abortion showed the same voting pattern as the Assembly, it provided retrospective legitimacy to its recommendations on climate. In France, independent surveys of public opinion on the key political issues found consistency with the distribution of opinions among the members of the Convention (Giraudet et al., 2021).

Political controversies around CAs are often framed around legitimacy concerns and have implications for resonance of outcomes. For example, in Scotland, Extinction Rebellion (XR) activists initially argued for the CA, but later provided a conflict frame by withdrawing support for it. In the UK, some experts providing input into the CA were criticized as being “climate advocates” by an organisation holding climate sceptic views. In Ireland, the climate CA was critiqued by climate sceptics and some sectors that disagreed with the outcomes on the ground of “not having an explicit for/against perspective presented and CAs not being the right way of arriving at policy decisions” (Irish informant).

Concerns around legitimacy of CAs can be used by actors that disagree with the outcomes as means to advance their political agenda. While political controversies seem to help draw media attention to the assemblies, they may have detrimental impact on the perceptions of their legitimacy, which may in turn affect the uptake of the recommendations by the political process. Much more research is needed on how political context and the framing of CAs by different partisan interests affects perceptions of legitimacy and resonance.

### *5.4 Access to the information about the process*

Strategies for ensuring accurate information is available and easily accessible, and strategies for minimising and responding to mis-representations are vital. All analysed CAs had dedicated communication channels, although the number and diversity of these channels, the level of detail and accessibility of information, as well as frequency of communications vary greatly. All CAs had dedicated websites (with only the Danish CA hosted on a government website), with some

engaging with social media, most prominently Twitter (e.g., Ireland, UK, Scotland) and Instagram (e.g., UK, Scotland). Most assemblies broadcasted and/or made available recordings of sessions with the experts on YouTube (e.g., France, UK, Scotland, Ireland) for the interested public to follow. The presentation of expert evidence in Scotland's CA was much more engaging as these were pre-prepared videos, made possible because the whole assembly took place online. In Scotland, a virtual observer session was hosted each weekend on the evidence base and deliberative process allowing interested parties to engage in Q&As with speakers. There were also opportunities to apply to observe most of the assemblies.

Most assemblies provided transparent information on the selection of citizens and experts. This includes information on the recruitment and the demographics of participants (e.g., France, Scotland, UK), rules of procedure, voting, transparency on errors and corrections (e.g., Ireland). Some assemblies were transparent on the costs (e.g., Ireland, UK).

In France and Ireland, the CAs allowed for public input in the form of submissions. The submissions and an overview of their content are made public, although the informant who commented on the French experience noted that there was not a clear plan for how to integrate that input into the assembly.

### *5.5 Access to the information about the process*

While the various approaches to ensuring transparency and accessible information laid out above are critical to the legitimacy of assemblies, most people outside the assembly process learn about an assembly not direct from its website or social media activity, but from third parties such as the mainstream media. Media and public engagement are thus critical elements of CA communications strategies, although with varying levels of emphasis and resource base. Some CAs appointed professional communication teams to manage media and public engagement (e.g., Ireland, France, UK, Scotland) and designated media spokespersons. Most assemblies issued regular press releases and some (e.g., France, Ireland) held targeted media briefings with key outlets.

In France, the media was given extensive access to the assembly's gatherings, proceedings and, unusually, to the members themselves. While anonymity was maintained by organisers, the members had permission to go public on social or traditional media and were encouraged by the organizers to reach out to their local community between sessions and meet with stakeholders. Media training was provided for those who wished to take this path. France is also an outlier in the way in which members continued to be active beyond the Convention, with several of them founding the NGO Les 150 which continues to monitor the fate of recommendations.

The external communication of the Danish CA in contrast was under close control of the sponsoring Ministry. Compared to other CAs, the Danish budget was low, affecting the resources that could be devoted to communication. Unlike other CAs, it did not have a dedicated social media channel and did not engage an external communication company.

An important factor for how a CA is perceived is the nature of its spokesperson(s). Most CA communications quote a combination of the conveners, experts, and members of the CAs. In France, three Guarantors, appointed to ensure independence of the assembly, procedural transparency, and a deliberative process of high-quality, played a public role in promoting the French Convention. Across all assemblies, it was challenging for organisers to find diversity of

voices in communication from the members: members with more prior political experience and higher education were generally more comfortable talking to the media. In Ireland, the independent chair acted as the main spokesperson and none of the members or experts were permitted to speak to the media during the process - a precaution adopted to deal with the controversy around abortion. Unlike in France, participants in Ireland were not encouraged to engage with the media either individually or collectively.

A detailed analysis of the media coverage was out of the scope of this project, however a high-level scan of media citations on the climate CAs shows limited coverage on the Scottish and Danish assemblies, although at the time of analysis neither had produced their final report - which is typically a high point for media engagement. Whether the on-line format of both assemblies might affect media attention is also worth considering. The French Convention has received by far the highest level of media attention, although the assemblies in Ireland and the UK were the subject of several media reports. In the UK, in particular, the assembly was competing with Brexit and Covid-19 reporting which no doubt had a detrimental effect on resonance. It is noticeable, however, that the media reporting on the Irish Citizen's Assembly's work on abortion led to significantly more media interest (and thus higher public resonance) than on climate. The high level of public awareness and support for the Convention in France (Mellier & Wilson, 2020) is no doubt driven by the degree of media attention.

## 6. Conclusion

Climate Assemblies (CAs) are deliberative processes of citizen participation which aim at finding tangible (re)actions to the climate crisis. They apply the idea of deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) - randomly selected groups of people, who are invited to deliberate about a question within a facilitated process, to come up with recommendations for public policy or decision-making.

CAs have already been employed on different levels of governance and by various actors, governmental as well as non-governmental. Experiences show that CAs' functionality as well as their intended effectiveness depend heavily on legitimacy and resonance, which connect them to the democratic system and the wider socio-political sphere. Thus, a pressing question for convenors, organizers as well as the academic community is: "How can the legitimacy and resonance of climate assemblies be ensured in the wider society?"

This paper aimed at bringing together some of the key insights from the theory and practice to formulate recommendations for enhancing the legitimacy and resonance of the upcoming CAs. Accompanying activities around past assemblies turned out to be important for their normative and perceived legitimacy, as well as resonance within the citizenry, public debate and policymaking. Before a CA can start, its place within the democratic system is to be created. To this end, organizers of most previous CAs had collaborated closely with governmental and administrative bodies, who in the ideal case, acted as commissioners of the CA. Based on observed good practice, we recommend the use of cross-sector collaboration before the initiation of a CA to ensure political relevance and visibility for the process.

Thorough campaigning for the process via various channels, and other pre-steps are often used to raise awareness among the wider public. However, these have not been sufficient in all previous CAs, despite the high importance of such activities. Outreach activities require adequate

sequencing and scaling, to spread information about the process and its outcomes. Beyond the use of professional public relation strategies, we recommend a communication strategy, which allows for active public engagement into the CA process itself.

Experiences from previous CAs and the literature stress the importance of high internal (deliberative) quality and transparency of the process. The learning and working sessions within the assembly need to be comprehensible, non-suggestive and inclusive as they are of high importance to internal legitimacy. We recommend the use of creative and varying facilitation techniques, to allow participants to take part beyond cognitive work. These could include artistic sessions, interactions based on participants' experiences and outside witnesses and engagement in gaming and mutual learning exercises. Regarding external informants, who are invited to provide insights for the participants, we recommend including the voices of affected persons and controversial viewpoints in addition to scientific expertise.

## **7. Future network activities**

To address some of the key research gaps on legitimacy and resonance amongst the wider public, future network activities should combine elements of knowledge integration, prototyping and research.

*Knowledge integration:* Recognizing that much knowledge around CAs is generated on the ground and vested in experience of practitioners and policy makers, KNOCA should seek to facilitate a systematic exchange with those who have organised, commissioned, participated in, and commented publicly on climate and other citizens' assemblies to better understand the challenges faced in enhancing legitimacy and facilitating resonance.

*Prototyping:* Building on the expertise in IASS in co-creative approaches, KNOCA should cooperate with actors wishing to establish a CA in conceptualising and actualising the process design. The aim would be to realise legitimacy and resonance in ways that are sensitive to the socio-political context and accomplish concrete goals. Furthermore, it might be used to design hybrid structures of participation in which CAs are a single, but crucial part of a mix of formats and methods for gaining legitimate public input to policy-making.

*Research:* To gather more robust evidence and reflect on potentials and barriers of CAs in realising legitimacy and resonance, KNOCA should promote and facilitate exchange and cooperation among interested scholars. The aim would be to contribute to joint research initiatives that foster exchange among scholars and practitioners, transdisciplinary research endeavours, which combine scientific and practical relevance. Key areas for future research include:

- Best practices for ensuring legitimacy of expert and knowledge input based on past experiences with deliberative processes on climate change policies.
- Whether and how consistency in the treatment of the outputs of a CA impact on its resonance, as well as the perception of its legitimacy, among political actors and the wider public.
- Whether and how differences in the broader political context and attitudes toward deliberative democracy influence legitimacy and resonance of CAs, as well as their impact.



- How political controversies around CAs impact the media attention they receive, the perceptions of their legitimacy, and the uptake of their recommendations.
- The effectiveness of public communication and engagement practices of CAs (e.g., against the perceptions of resonance they achieved through media coverage, interviews, and public opinion surveys) to deliver evidence-informed practical recommendations on what works under what circumstances.
- Further comparative analysis to understand the effectiveness of strategies to gain political resonance in various CAs and to assess their short-term and longer-term impacts on the political debate and policymaking.

## **8. Research methods**

This research briefing is based on the rapid review of the literature related to legitimacy and resonance of CAs and other forms of DMP, the communication mediums of the national CAs in France, Denmark, Ireland, Scotland, and the UK (e.g., their websites) and a scan of media coverage. This was complemented by exploratory semi-structured interviews with the organizers and experts that provided input into the CAs in France, Denmark, Ireland, Scotland, and the UK assemblies. The briefing does not claim to have provided an exhaustive literature review or comprehensive empirical analysis. Its purpose is to identify key themes, early learnings, and areas for future research.

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## Appendix

### Guiding questions for the semi-structured interviews and desk research

#### *Interview questions:*

1. How would you define legitimacy and resonance of CA assembly?
2. What are the factors that are likely to shape perceptions of legitimacy and resonance?
3. Has legitimacy been considered/discussed in the design of the assembly?
  - How did you plan for enhancing resonance and public communication and engagement around the assembly?
  - How has it been considered in the internal design process (selection, expertise called)?
  - Has it been considered in the external communications and how?
4. How was communication handled:
  - Who was in charge?
  - What was the role of professional PR agencies?
  - What information has been communicated and at what points (live versus later)?
  - What were the key multipliers?
  - Ambassadors/speakers for the assembly?
5. What actions are taken in relation to assemblies to try and maximise legitimacy and resonance, and how effective are they?
6. Has the strategy been effective: were the objectives around legitimacy and resonance achieved? What would you have done differently?
7. Are there different strategies for gaining legitimacy and resonance among the political actors and general public?

#### *Supplementary desk research questions*

- Governance arrangements to ensure legitimacy- what is stated publicly?



- How transparent has been the process around the CA (e.g. how much information was shared on the selection, choice of inputs, governance, funding)?
- Dedicated communication channel:
  - Is there a dedicated website?
  - How often is the information on the assembly updated?
  - What type of information is published and at what points?
  - Is there opportunity for submission of inputs from outside?
- Proactive media outreach
  - Were there dedicated media briefings and press releases?
  - What was their frequency?
  - Who are the key people cited/spokespeople for CA highlighted?
- Has there been a proactive media engagement (spokespersons/ambassadors of the CA)? Who are they?
- How much attention has the CA received in the media (and political debate, e.g., in the parliament?) and what was the coverage positive or critical (use media coverage and potentially parliamentary debate as a proxy for CA's resonance)?

