



Guiding principles for setting the remit of a climate assembly

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Climate assemblies – and citizens’ assemblies more generally – are becoming ever more popular as a form of citizen engagement. Critical to the success of assemblies is the characteristics of the issue to be discussed. Often it is government ministers or parliamentarians who decide on the remit, but it can also be civil society actors, randomly selected citizens’ themselves, or stakeholder bodies. Whoever it may be, they all face the same question: Is the issue on the table a good one to give to a citizens’ assembly?

The criteria laid out in this short report produced for the [Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies](#) (KNOCA) can serve as guiding principles to find an answer to that question. However, there is no silver bullet.

For example, the ideal scope of an assembly will depend on many other contextual and design factors: the function the assembly is expected to fulfil, the time and money available, the number and complexity of sub-questions, the way the process is facilitated, the type of output envisioned, and so on. The criteria we offer are best understood as a checklist of factors to consider in deciding on a remit – as much as what to avoid as what works well.

Setting the ‘right’ remit is no guarantee for a successful assembly. But without a well-considered remit, an assembly will face many challenges and is unlikely to be an effective vehicle for public deliberation. Our aim is to provide guidance as you wrestle with the complexity of choosing the right remit.



Guiding principles



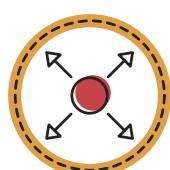
Context

The remit fits the context of climate politics.



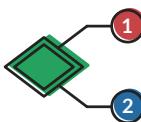
Timing

An opportunity to affect change exists.



Scope

Sufficient time to develop recommendations, understand consequences, and provide justifications.



Dilemmas

Clear trade-offs should be made.



Authority

The sponsoring authority has sufficient power to act on recommendations.



Legitimacy

The remit is seen as legitimate by most groups.



Political relevance

Policymakers see a need for change on the issue.



Ownership

Citizens are not unjustly constrained by the remit.



Receptiveness

Policymakers welcome citizen input on the issue.



Resource efficiency

Societal benefits outweigh invested resources.



Societal relevance

The issue is important to citizens.

The principles in more detail

Context

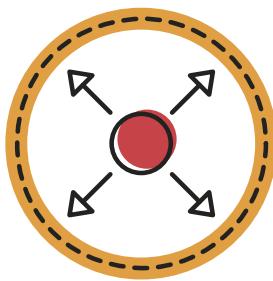


The remit fits the context of climate politics.

The broad context of climate politics affects the legitimacy and relevance of the remit. For example, the remits of a number of climate assemblies have included targets for reducing carbon emissions by a given year (e.g., net zero by 2050). While in some countries broad agreement (often in the form of legislation) exists on setting such target dates, in other countries it may be seen as illegitimately constraining citizens who may not be willing to accept the costs of such a target – or who may choose to act faster. Likewise, a remit asking climate assemblies to consider social justice may be in line with a widely recognized social concern but may also be seen as political bias.

The importance of different climate-related issues can vary between contexts. Most assemblies have focused primarily on aspects of mitigation, but this approach to public engagement is equally relevant for considering pressing adaptation challenges facing many jurisdictions.

Scope



Sufficient time to develop recommendations, understand consequences, and provide justifications.

A good scope for an assembly depends on the specific context. There are merits in both narrower and wider scopes - i.e. focusing on a specific area of climate policy or across a range of climate policies.

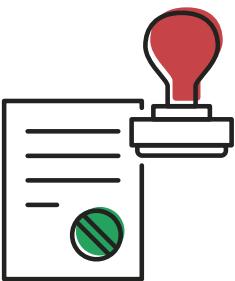
A narrower scope can lead to more actionable recommendations making it more likely for them to be taken up by policymakers. But, the narrower the scope

- the larger the risk that participants lose ownership, or are unjustly constrained,
- the less likely structural and systemic change is considered,
- the less likely is integrated thinking across (sectoral) siloes.

A wider scope can be more open to what citizens find most relevant and may generate new or unconventional ideas. But, the wider the scope

- the less time citizens have for going into depth on issues,
- the easier it is to question whether most citizens understand fully what they are recommending,
- the more recommendations will be produced and therefore the more likely they are to be 'cherry-picked' – for sponsors to adopt only those proposals that fit their existing agenda.

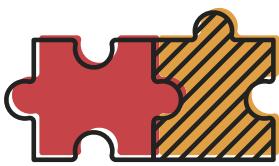
Many practitioners and observers believe that climate assemblies have suffered from negative knock-on effects because of their wide scope. Some are critical of the practice of breaking up the assembly into sub-groups to cover a range of themes as this generates a large number of recommendations and participants do not understand fully many of the proposals from themes they did not work on.



Authority

The sponsoring authority has sufficient power to act on recommendations.

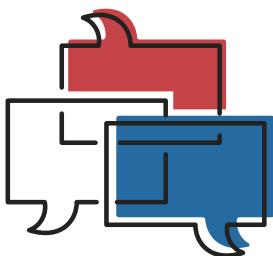
An assembly should focus predominantly on issues where the sponsoring authority has sufficient (jurisdictional or lobbying) power to act. For example, it does not seem sensible for a national-level citizens' assembly to focus on an issue that is almost entirely decided upon at the municipal or EU level. This criterion can be difficult to apply. Often decision-making powers are dispersed across multiple levels and ministries. If that is the case, impact is likely increased when officials from these different authorities are drawn into the process.



Political relevance

Policymakers see a need for change on the issue.

The policy impact of an assembly is likely to increase if policymakers see a general need for action on the issue. Assemblies are particularly suited where conventional decision-making structures have proved unable to deal with an issue effectively. Examples include issues characterised by political deadlock, topics seen as too hot to handle by politicians, or areas where policymakers face potential conflicts of interest.



Receptiveness

Policymakers welcome citizen input on the issue.

If policymakers are not supportive of the idea of citizen input, the political impact of an assembly is likely to be low. The situation may be different when there are strong rules in place on how decision makers must respond to recommendations or when the assembly sparks heightened media attention and public pressure (but, to date, this has been uncommon). Bring politicians and policy officials who have the power to affect the impact of the assembly into the process at an early stage. Policymakers and public officials unfamiliar with assemblies often become less suspicious and more favourable of the process if they have opportunities to directly experience the assembly and/or meet participants.



Societal relevance

The issue is important to citizens.

It is not all about policymakers, of course. Ultimately, assemblies ought to deliberate on issues that resonate with citizens. Hence, the issue given to an assembly should be important to citizens or should likely become important to citizens when made aware of the issue's magnitude. Bringing different groups together to deliberate on the potential remit of a climate assembly may be one way of incorporating different perspectives on what is socially relevant.

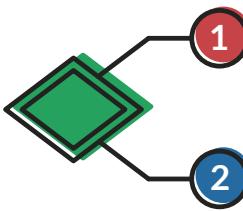




Timing

An opportunity to affect change exists.

Consider how timing may influence the success of the assembly, for example, recent or upcoming policy processes, elections, news cycles, or other foreseeable time factors. Obvious as it may seem, avoid running an assembly when decisions on the issue have already been taken. Depending on the function the assembly is meant to have (e.g., directly inform policy), it may be important that it fits neatly into a policy cycle. If the assembly is government run (and the opposition does not strongly support it), then it is better not to have elections in-between as the government may change, and recommendations may be swept under the table.



Dilemmas

Clear trade-offs should be made.

The issue should be framed towards its moral dimensions and towards actionable recommendations. Special attention should be given to aspects of the issue where social and economic trade-offs may arise. No political issue is too technical for a citizens' assembly. But the value of citizen input rests on what they have been asked to make recommendations on. People may say: 'You don't want to fly in an airplane designed by citizens'. Well, it depends on whether the citizens were asked to design the optimal shape and position of the engines, or whether they were asked to prioritise comfort or fuel efficiency, and to what extent – or to consider broader questions about air travel policy given its climate impact.¹ You don't need citizen advice on highly technical questions where a diverse group of scientists or engineers can legitimately provide better answers, but rather when it comes to identifying options where values matter, or where different values need to be balanced. Climate assemblies can deal with complex technical information but should be focused on producing actionable recommendations on issues where society faces difficult dilemmas on how to act.



Legitimacy

The remit is seen as legitimate by most groups.

Arguably the worst that can happen to an assembly is for it to be seen as manipulated or as a mere trick to gain support for decisions that were already taken beforehand. Therefore, it is desirable that a wide range of different social groups and interests accept (or even express their support for) the process and its remit from the outset. On the other hand, a fear of conflict and bad publicity can lead sponsors to choose remits that are less relevant. There are at least two ways of counteracting this. The first is to be transparent in your choices, and to provide defensible justifications. Beyond that, bringing different political and social groups together to deliberate on the remit of the climate assembly may be a way of incorporating different perspectives and increasing its legitimacy.

¹ I owe this analogy to David Farrell who, in turn, credits Ken Carty for its origins, and Oliver Escobar who added the corrective about aircraft design. This is probably a bad example for climate assemblies!



Ownership

Citizens are not unjustly constrained by the remit.

Citizens participating in the assembly should never lose their sense of ownership of the process and their recommendations. Sometimes sponsors may have good reasons to constrain the remit. Being transparent and allowing space for scrutiny by members of the assembly not only reduces the risk of citizens losing their sense of ownership but it is also democratically sound.



Resource efficiency

Societal benefits outweigh invested resources.

Running a successful climate assembly costs quite a bit of money and many people, not least the citizens themselves, invest a great deal of their time. A seven-weekend, one-hundred person assembly is not worth it for every issue. It is difficult to identify (or even quantify) all the societal benefits an assembly can deliver. This criterion of 'resource efficiency' is just a reminder that other, less resource intensive democratic innovations exist (e.g., citizens' juries).

ABOUT THE REPORT

This report has been produced for the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA). The principles have been developed through interviews with leading assembly practitioners.

KNOCA is a European-based network that aims to improve the commissioning, design, implementation, impact and evaluation of climate assemblies, using evidence, knowledge exchange and dialogue. KNOCA documents climate assembly practice, identifies and disseminates best practice for impact and shapes future trends. You can find us and join KNOCA at <https://knoca.eu/>





