



KNOCA

Knowledge Network On Climate Assemblies

Attitudes of policy actors towards citizens assemblies on climate change

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Objectives of the project are to understand:

- How the key policy actors perceive the role of citizens assemblies for the medium and long-term policy making on climate change in Europe;
- The key perceived barriers (and opportunities) for climate assemblies;
- The level and source of knowledge on the assemblies; the knowledge gaps and ways to address them;
- Ways to respond to resistance to assemblies amongst climate governance actors;
- What KNOCA can do to engage more effectively with climate governance communities to promote climate assemblies.

Expert interviews

| Primary current affiliation | Number of interviews |
|--|----------------------|
| Policy makers, politicians | 6 |
| Civil society | 11 |
| Climate policy advisors | 4 |
| Assembly organisers and their advisors | 9 |
| Total | 27 |

Country expertise covered: EU+15

Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, UK

Barriers perceived by climate policy actors

Misconceptions that:

- People can't handle discussing a complex issue; 'naive or subject to lobbyist influences'
- Recommendations would come at a lower ambition
- Assembly is taking decisions rather than advising

Fear of unpredictability; lower ambition/no support for net zero; delay to action

Assembly process being not accessible/need to ensure there are other ways to engage

Climate seen by some as a divisive topic politically

Lack of clear political follow-up

Challenges to the balance of power; fear of lost control; 'parliamentarians are the legitimate representative of people'

Objections or no support from the environmental civil society

Perceived risks of holding a climate assembly

Lack of clear mandate: perception that assembly is a convoluted way to learn about what people think

Mismatching expectations around what can be done in terms of budget and impact

Risks in the responses to assemblies (or lack of pick by the political process)

Badly managed process or climate assembly not being suitable for the purposes may discredit the instrument

Quotes on concerns and risks of assemblies

"When the public has an opinion of something that they have no good understanding about, for me it's just not something that the policymakers should take into consideration", civil society expert.

"The main misconceptions both with the public as with civil society, as well politicians and policymakers is that they underestimate people", assembly expert.

"These people are advisors they are not elected. So simply by that fact, they can't have the power to take decisions", civil society expert.

"If a Parliament or government says: 'we disagree with the recommendation from citizens, we have a different take for this and that reason', that is legitimate. And if that is understood, then assemblies are helpful. If that is not understood and if there's expectation on making decisions, then I would say it's really harmful", civil society expert.

"We want citizen assembly to make proposals, and we want those proposals to be implemented. But if we say we want all of them to be implemented, it means that we don't want a Parliament to have a role", civil society expert.

"If you make a decision to use an assembly approach, then you are opening yourself up to the possibility that people come up with ideas that you haven't considered or are at odds. And you need to have a good understanding of how you're going to handle that... And what I see usually people haven't really thought about early on", assembly organiser.

Perceived benefits of a climate assembly

Brings in tacit knowledge or lived experience to ensure policies don't miss issues important to people's lives

Reaching out to citizens who are not already active; delivers better sense of public opinion

Effective instrument for discussing difficult policy issues

Potentially high impact and visibility

Help improve trust in parliaments, government and politicians

Make clear the public appetite for ambitious action; challenging the views on what is possible and would be supported by the public

Gives people a sense of democratic empower

Quotes on benefits of climate assemblies

“I wasn't really concerned that people would be less ambitious than government in terms of headline figure. I thought it was quite likely that people might focus on different things to the government, and they did”, assembly commissioner.

“One of the most important outcomes was for the government to find that in certain ways the public actually is ahead of their own thinking and is prepared to go further and faster than the government might have expected “, Member of Parliament, UK.

“They show that citizens across different parts of society do care for decisions taken by governments. This is a powerful tool to show citizens awareness and mobilization and therefore should be used for that purpose”, civil society expert.

“I wouldn't say that this is a way to inform your policy. It's more a way to inform yourself about potential public reaction”, former senior politician and civil servant.

Political context matters

- Links to pre-existing public opinion in the country on citizens assemblies and on climate change
- Factors in favor:
 - requirements to hold an assembly in the legislation/policy;
 - political pressure for increased public engagement and participation;
 - previous experience with CAs and strong democratic revival sentiment
- Factors against:
 - divided political space on climate change
 - lack of previous experience with citizens assemblies
- France: divide in the climate movement with newcomers like Friday for Future supportive, and environmental NGOs initially cautious and seeing it as a way out
- UK: Emphasis on innovation and not staying behind to address reservations by politicians
- Spain: Fears of opponents using the assembly to deepen the political divide

Challenges and opportunities for the EU climate policy

Barriers:

- Feeling that EU policy operation is challenging and inefficient, difficult for an assembly to have impact
- Many EU-focused NGOs are absorbed with other issues and have little capacity to focus on citizen engagement and assemblies

Opportunities:

- Social movements instilled the fear of backlash; more willingness to foster societal acceptance, CAs are seen as one way of doing it
- The EU governance regulation requires multi-level dialogue in each country about policy choices and implementation of national climate plans and LTS: opportunity to foster assembly culture. But there are no rules or reporting requirements
- Some actors attempted to include a call for the EU Multilevel Climate and Energy Dialogue platforms to become more permanent and deliberative processes

Views on the potential of European climate assemblies

- EU-level assembly might be useful to deal with disconnect between politicians and citizens
- Combination of national level and European level assemblies might strengthen each other, but it requires serious planning to make sure that they don't interfere with each other
- Importance of diversity of voices, not only western and northern Europe
- Some proposed a series of national assemblies that deal with a European question
- Need a focused topic: e.g. adaptation tools, measures and policies; social justice issues; food security and energy security around carbon neutrality
- Making sure the recommendation goes to an organization that has the power to use it
- Ensuring much of deliberative practice in the shaping of national energy and climate plans
- Pressure the Council to call on the Commission to do more about public participation /revision of the governance regulation

Ideas on overcoming the barriers

- Understand political motivations of involving people in discussing options and trade offs
- Articulate the value of involving the public in those discussions
- Consider assembly as part of a broader climate governance
- Clear mandate for the assembly's purpose and how it will inform the political process
- Get the sequencing right: ideally before a new policy process starts
- Having a more focused issue rather than looking broadly at 'climate' as a whole
- Setting citizen expectations to reduce the risk of backlash
- Making draft proposals public so wider population can discuss and input
- Institutionalization as means to foster longer-term transformation
- Having assemblies in each political constituency over time helps engage politicians

Questions for discussion today

- Are there additional barriers and misconceptions around climate assemblies in the climate policy community that need to be addressed?
- What can KNOCA do to address the barriers and engage climate policy actors around climate assemblies?
- What actors should KNOCA engage with in the climate policy community to increase impact of climate assemblies?



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