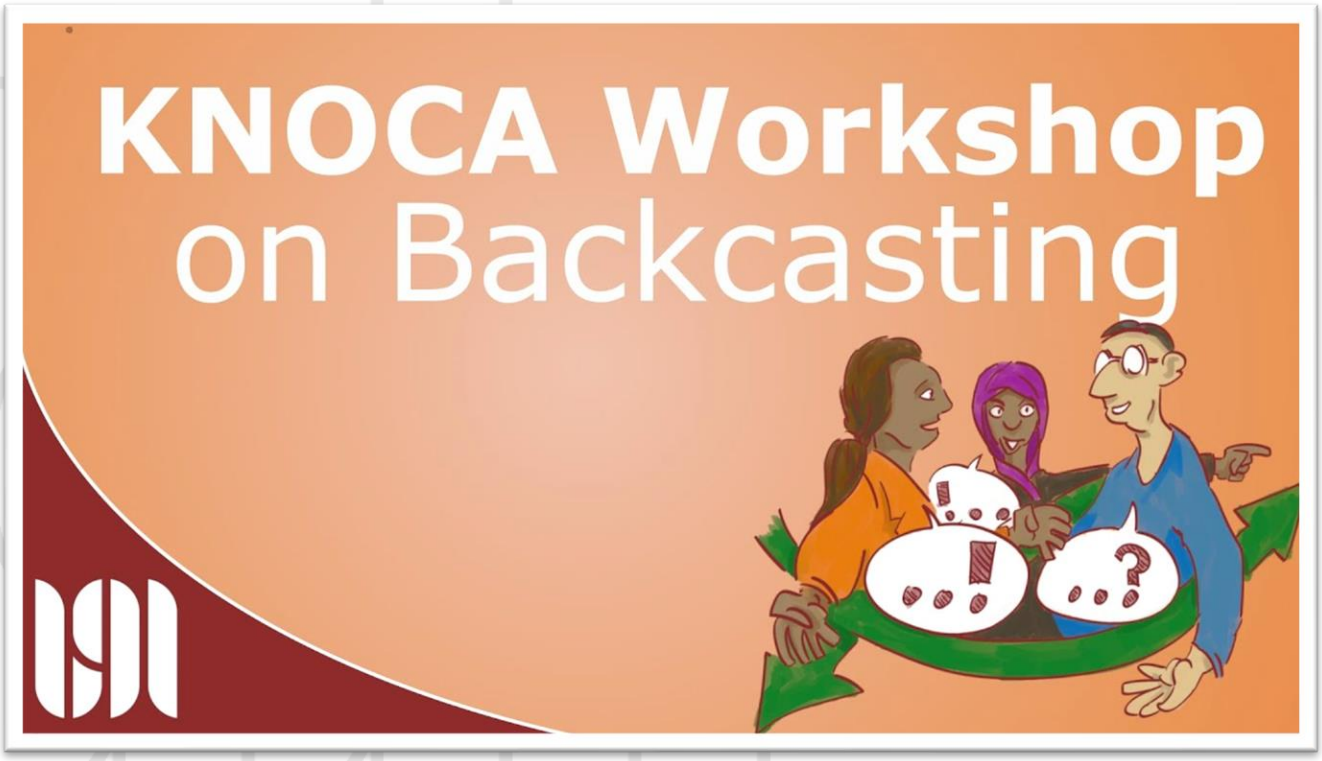
Are backcasting and scenario-based planning compatible with climate assemblies?

- An exploration of possibilities and boundaries



This document summarises the key insights from the Backcasting workshop on November 14th, 2022, and suggests next steps for KNOCA activity. The appendix collates the comments made by participants on an accompanying Mural board.

Panellists in the workshop:

- Kelly McBride, Deliberative Democracy Lead, TPX Impact
- Sophie Guillain, Managing Director, and Partner of Res publica
- Tom van der Voorn, Climate Change Adaptation Researcher & Consultant
- Richard Blume, Senior Sustainability Advisor, The Natural Step

Read the background document on Climate Assemblies here

Read the background document on Backcasting here

Watch the full recording of the workshop here

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Introduction

Climate assemblies are tasked with considering long-term mitigation and/or adaptation policies but it remains relatively uncommon for assemblies to integrate foresight approaches such as backcasting and scenario-based planning. The KNOCA backcasting workshop rested on the premise that integrating such foresight approaches into climate assemblies has significant potential. As such, the workshop began by addressing the following key questions: Can backcasting and scenario-based planning be used within the framework of climate assemblies? If so, how? Would it bring new perspectives and recommendations from the assemblies? Would it bring new forms of interaction between experts, citizens, and decision makers? Experts and practitioners on foresight methods and climate assemblies shared their experiences and insights, exploring the possibilities and boundaries of the integration of backcasting and scenario-based planning into climate assembly practice.
This is the first step in KNOCA's work in this area and we look forward to developing further activity that brings together both communities of practice.

Key learning and reflections

Examples of the use of backcasting/scenario-based planning in climate assemblies

- Some climate assemblies have incorporated elements of backcasting and scenario-based planning into differing extents, although we are unaware of any assembly that has incorporated these techniques in a comprehensive fashion.

- Scotland's Climate Assembly used scenarios and storytelling to extend members' imagination through four fictional stories of a day in the life of a person living in Scotland in 2040 developed in collaboration with Forum for the Future. Forum for the Future used a video on the development of rock 'n' roll to help members become comfortable with the idea of systems change. The four stories were used as the basis for work in small groups to explore potential barriers and opportunities for change at different levels (e.g., individual, household, organisational, governmental, etc.), using a range of facilitation techniques and prompt questions. Towards the end of the process, a video Vision for Scotland – How the Recommendations Could Shape our Future was produced that captured how some of the goals and recommendations of the assembly could shape the lives of people living in Scotland by the year 2025.

- Grenoble's Climate Assembly drew on the experience of the earlier French Convention where members had been asked to envision a low carbon future but had found it difficult

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to relate this vision to the recommendations that emerged. Given time constraints, to help members understand the idea of different trajectories towards carbon neutrality, and to clarify distinctions between individual and collective behaviour change, the Grenoble assembly used the reference pathways for carbon neutrality published by the French Agency for National Transition. Based on these reference pathways, the members developed their own vision for the territory and developed recommendations in an iterative fashion – moving between their long-term visions for thematic areas and their proposals.

Key findings in the workshop

- Using elements of backcasting such as scenarios and storytelling can help extend citizens' imagination to explore possible futures – both desirable and undesirable.
- Processes that get people out of their comfort zones and help them to think about the future are valuable – although challenging for some. Using backcasting techniques can help people become comfortable with thinking about long-term visions, as well as levers for and barriers to change.
- A key challenge is to evaluate/model the economic, social, and ecological impact of proposals against visions (both given technical constraints and time constraints in assemblies)
- Backcasting and scenario-based planning have tended to engage relatively small groups of stakeholders which may be in opposition to the formats of climate assemblies. While assembly members have often developed their own visions, experiments so far have tended to work with scenarios developed by experts.

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Design questions for backcasting and scenario-based planning in climate assemblies

- It is important to consider who oversees the backcasting exercise. E.g., is it initiated by experts or researchers, or by policymakers/government? If it is government initiated there can be a lot of pressure on the outcomes rather than the process which can have an impact on the results.

- Facilitation is key. Access to professional facilitation is particularly crucial when adding complex processes like these to a climate assembly.

- You need to create tension between the present and the desired future. It can be uncomfortable, but it helps to have a language to discuss the "unknown unknown".

- Training members in backcasting means that they can become ambassadors/advocates for such methods and ways of thinking once the assembly has finished its work.

- Using backcasting in climate assemblies should be designed to produce meaningful output and generate stakeholder commitment. The latter can be challenging given the format of assemblies.

- Time is a challenge since climate assemblies are already under time pressure. Creativity is needed regarding how we design these processes.

- Using scenarios and backcasting can be create tension with the potentially narrow policy goals of policy makers and commissioning authorities.

- The feasibility check needs to be considered in a backcasting process: How do we make sure that the steps in a backcasting process are feasible and implementable?

- It is important to know how to prioritize our goals/pathways – see for example the questions used by Natural Steps https://thenaturalstep.org/approach/.

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Challenges

- A backcasting process requires interpreting large amounts of data, which clashes with the limited time available in climate assemblies.
- Danger that scenarios, visions and backcasting steps that are prepared in advance by external experts are seen as the only preferred options. Members need to be encouraged to use them as reference points to develop their own analysis.
- We need to be conscious of the bias that can be introduced through scenarios and be transparent about who has been involved in the creation of trajectories.
- Getting a group to reach consensus about an agreed future vision is challenging, not least because some participants will be uncomfortable about stepping into the unknown.
- A common language is needed to break down barriers between members and experts – which is difficult when experts often work in technical silos.
- Tensions often emerge between present conditions and desired futures. There may be a tendency to compromise on the vision or pretend the current situation is better in order to resolve tension. It is important to recognise discomfort and good facilitation is critical to make this a creative tension.
- Uncertainty about how to use backcasting and scenario-based planning tools needs to be overcome.

(For comments from workshop participants taken from the Mural, see the Appendix)

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Next steps – reflections from Tom van der Voorn

This workshop offers first insight into the challenges of using backcasting and scenario-based planning for climate assemblies. Such foresight approaches have potential to empower climate assemblies and vice versa.

Following from the discussions, we propose two ways for advancing the integration of climate assemblies and foresight methods:

1. The citizens' assembly model allows for in-depth learning and respectful discussions among participants and thus is well-suited for addressing complex and polarizing issues such as climate change. Backcasting and scenario-based planning can be integrated into climate assemblies to support members' learning, deliberations, and decision making. In its essence backcasting is a reflexive and iterative approach because it does not assume that a group of experts or stakeholders can develop a finalized vision of the future, which then will act as an immovable utopia.

2. Climate assemblies (or similar deliberative processes) can be integrated into backcasting and scenario-based planning exercises as a way of structuring citizen engagement. Climate assemblies can be part of the reflexive and iterative approach of backcasting by enriching the process of vision and pathway development and enhancing stakeholder commitment and support for the outcomes of the backcasting exercise.

In advancing this integration, key questions that require further investigation and experimentation include:

- What are the best ways for climate assemblies to benefit from backcasting and scenario-based planning? Which elements of the backcasting process could be integrated into a climate assembly and how? What are the requirements regarding process, knowledge and outcomes? What would the integration of backcasting and scenario-based planning into climate assemblies mean to the relationship between members, stakeholders, and experts? What consequences would the use of backcasting, and scenario-based planning have for the remit as well as for the outputs of a climate assembly (for example, in terms of being wide or narrow or dealing with adaptation or mitigation)?

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- How can backcasting and scenario-based planning benefit from climate assemblies? In what ways can climate assemblies be integrated into scenario-based planning and backcasting processes that engage a wider range of stakeholders and at what point in such processes?

Despite their potential, the systematic use of foresight approaches such as backcasting and scenario-based planning in the context of climate assemblies is in its infancy. More experimentation is needed in order to advance the integration of climate assemblies and foresight methods. We invite practitioners and researchers to engage in experimenting with backcasting in the context of climate assemblies. We encourage you to reach out to KNOCA to share your experience.

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Appendix: Reflections from the participants

These comments were gathered in a Mural during the workshop.

What is the potential for integrating foresight tools into climate assemblies?

- Maybe there can be a point of not doing the full process of a back casting process inside a CA but incorporate a chosen part of it in an assembly?
- We can also explore undesirable futures
- We could introduce different scenarios to assemblies
- Using scenarios and backcasting might save time and help deliver big amounts of information in a comprehensive form
- Non-influence from lobbies, foreseeing long term rather than 4 years
- visions can be powerful in communication
- In their ability to collect, curate and scientifically record ideas and priorities
- In their ability to facilitate the curation of reasoning with ideas as a legitimate force for improving democracy
- In their ability to be inclusive and facilitate engagement across time zones

What are the challenges to integrating foresight tools into climate assemblies?

- Unsure how to include backcasting knowing what we know about them
- Time is tough - imaging different visions, scenarios, pathways is already challenging work
- Could mean a 1–2-year process with informed people, need to time to calculate
- Fitting with narrow policy goals of policy makers
- Data we use to create scenarios - can talk about flaws though
- Changing the scenario-based tools towards working with larger audiences (MvV)
- None, as they save time when used as a hybrid
- Dialogue is a technology that requires an element of learning - but all intuitive
- The default to English loses ideas which are language sensitive, but only in video captioning

What is the potential for integrating climate assemblies into foresight processes?

- Bringing intuitive lay knowledge
- Could bring more deliberative elements to research
- working with a larger group of lay people than normally
- Increasing the impact of scenarios on policies
- If you trust people with this responsibility, you will surprise yourself
- It depends at what stage in the process you are talking about

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What are the challenges to integrating climate assemblies into foresight processes?

- Backcasting is data and resource intensive
- It requires a lot of knowledge
- Ordinarily you would invite people with lots of expertise to engage in backcasting
- Political will
- Underestimating the potential of people as experts
- if we fail to understand the ability of technology to facilitate this process - we will lose the power of collective intelligence
- We are now able to harness collective reasoning which will allow for inclusive mixes of expert and non-expert

What ideas do you have?

- Facilitating citizen learning processes
- Key consideration: How do we frame the climate assembly?
- What if we frame the next assemblies with the principle of degrowth?
- Could develop possible pathways to deliberate on
- "Happy Simplicity of life" for the assemblies
- How much does the information that was presented to the citizens affect their policy recommendations?
- Demonstrate our solutions - because we must have the answers between us

How should we take action?

- Capacity building
- Setting convention - we need to do the visionary stuff before the feasible
- Helping public authorities understand the value of imaginative / visionary work
- There are so many materials that we can already use
- Database of scenarios to use across processes
- To be useful, need to be clear on goal of the process first
- Sharing research materials as well as reports
- Practitioner observer programme to help fine tune designs
- Backcasting simulation
- Ask Zealand Academy to give you a very simple demonstration of the very latest co-creative forms of collaborative intelligence for this question

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