



# KNOCA

## Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies

KNOCA BRIEFING NO.7

### **Attitudes of Climate Policy Actors towards Climate Assemblies**

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*KNOCA is a European-based network that aims to improve the commissioning, design, implementation, impact and evaluation of climate assemblies. The network hosts events and produces a range of practical resources, as well as coordinating knowledge development activities. We welcome individuals and organisations with experience or interest in either commissioning, running or analysing these processes and their outputs. Please reach out to us at [info@knoca.eu](mailto:info@knoca.eu) to share, discuss and inform best practice and new developments in climate assembly design, delivery and analysis.*

*This document was originally written to help scope a KNOCA programme of work with climate policy actors.*

## Summary

There has been a persistent lack of attention to climate assemblies among the core climate policy community, including the NGOs. This limits the visibility and policy impact of climate assemblies. Misconceptions exist about the risk of assemblies, power balance issues and capacity constraints among policy actors. This Briefing analyses the attitudes of climate policy actors towards climate assemblies, identifying key barriers to their engagement and providing recommendations for climate assembly practitioners. The Briefing draws on research from a KNOCA Knowledge Development Project completed in May 2022.

### 1. Background and strategic challenges

Attention from the key political and societal actors and their engagement with climate assemblies (CAs) is central for the assemblies' impact and resonance. Their engagement is particularly important in strengthening the overall linkage between the assembly's outcomes and the political process, including the uptake of the recommendations by the relevant authority (e.g. parliament or the executive branch). Political actors and influencers also play an important role in forming public opinion about the CAs and the broader awareness about relevant climate policies, as they attract much media attention and often serve as a point of reference for the broader public.

Hence, the attitudes of policy actors, such as civil society, parliamentarians, policy makers and their advisors, are consequential. Whether they regard citizens as capable of making decisions over important issues, or whether they perceive citizens' assemblies to be undermining their decisional power has a decisive influence as to whether an assembly is endowed with constrictive power over the decision-making process, if the emergent recommendations are implemented, and even whether the assembly is organised in the first place<sup>1</sup>.

At the end of 2021, the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) launched a Knowledge Development Project (KDP) with the objectives to understand attitudes of climate policy actors in Europe towards citizens assemblies on climate change, to develop insights into the knowledge gaps and other barriers to the wider engagement with citizens assemblies on climate change in the context of European (and national) policy making, and to identify potential ways to overcome these barriers. The project included convening, from January 2022, a working group with KNOCA members that discussed the scope of the analysis, commented on the methodology and the key stakeholders to approach, and reviewed the preliminary results of the analysis. The results were presented at a [KNOCA workshop](#) involving a panel discussion with several senior climate policy actors in May 2022.

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<sup>1</sup> Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020; Rangoni et al., 2021.

One of the key strategic findings of the project is that there has been a persistent lack of attention to climate assemblies among the core climate policy community. Climate NGOs on average have not been prioritizing this topic partially due to capacity constraints and partially due to lack of awareness and understanding of the workings of the assemblies and their potential benefits for advancing ambitious climate policy. There are still some misconceptions of the risks of CAs, such as the fear of the assemblies coming up with less ambitious recommendations that would lead to policy regress and/or strengthen the opponents to climate action (which the proposals of assemblies contradicts). There are also power balance issues, where some institutions feel that CAs threaten their position and relevance in the climate governance ecosystem.

The project has identified a strong need for KNOCA and for the community working on climate assemblies at large to consider strategic engagement with the climate policy community to raise awareness about climate assemblies. This Briefing contains an updated report on the findings of the project.

## 2. Objectives and methodology

The analysis of attitudes towards climate assemblies is based on semi-structured interviews with a variety of climate policy actors (see Table 1) and informed by a literature review. We have conducted interviews with 27 policy experts, representing perspectives from 15 EU Member States, including Belgium, Bulgaria, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Scotland, Spain, and the UK; and the EU-level climate policy community. The interviewees included climate-focused civil society, public sector experts and politicians.

**Table 1: Break-down of interviews conducted for the KDP project**

Stakeholder type	Accepted and completed	Approached	Acceptance rate
Policy makers, politicians	6	36	16%
Civil society	11	15	73%
Climate policy advisors	4	5	80%
Assembly organisers and their advisors	9	10	90%
Total	27	66	40%

The questions addressed through the interviews aimed to understand:

- How do the key policy actors perceive the role of CAs for medium and long-term policy making on climate change?

- What are the perceptions on the key barriers (and opportunities) for greater use and stronger impact of CAs at the national and regional level in Europe?
- What is the level and source of knowledge/understanding on CAs amongst these actors? What are the key knowledge and analytical gaps in the policy community and potential ways to address them?
- How to respond to different forms of reticence and resistance to climate assemblies amongst key climate governance actors?
- What can KNOCA do to engage more effectively with climate governance communities to promote climate assemblies?

One of the challenges for the project has been reaching climate assembly sceptics among the climate policy community, as well as reaching politicians. Most actors who accepted the request for interview would have been already at least remotely interested in the topic. The most responsive audience has been civil society, organizers of assemblies and experts that have had some involvement with the issues around climate change and democracy. Yet we have managed to get a diverse set of first-hand perspectives from different national contexts and had very informative insights from the experts who had direct interactions with assembly critics in their respective countries.

### **3. Learnings from the academic literature**

#### **3.1. *Research gaps***

Although much prior research has focused on the benefits brought by deliberative instruments overall (both for participants and policymaking), the literature on the attitudes of policy actors remains scarce. This is particularly the case in relation to climate assemblies. Some scholars highlight the dependence of CAs and deliberative mini publics (DMPs) more broadly, on political will as a key concern and potential shortcoming for the effectiveness of these instruments. CAs only have a consultative role, meaning that if political elites do not acknowledge the added benefits of CAs or they do not approve of the results, CAs risk being inconsequential (Vrydagh & Caluwaerts, 2020).

Several studies explicitly recognise the gaps in the understanding of CAs and DMPs among policy makers at large and in climate spaces specifically. Some studies tackle public opinion at large (Már & Gastil, 2021), while others investigate the links between CAs and the broader political process (Vrydagh et al., 2020). The few studies that assess the way in which mini-publics, and CAs in particular, are perceived by policy actors acknowledge this gap in understanding (Vrydagh et al., 2020) and seek to fill it (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020; Niessen, 2019). Although each of the contributions provide valuable insight, the generalizability of studies regarding individual CAs is limited by the decisive role that the socio-political context plays in attitude formation.

### 3.2. Potential factors determining attitudes towards CAs

The literature on DMPs (however limited) suggests that elites tend to be more sceptical about the value of mini publics than lay citizens. Koskimaa and Rapeli (2020) argue that this is caused by the decision-makers perceiving democratic innovations as “infringements of their power position” and “a questioning of their professional skills” (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020, p. 648), losing sight of the benefits brought by participation. Rangoni et al. (2021) and Niessen (2019) agree that DMPs enter in competition with traditional decision-making, leading political actors to perceive DMPs as a threat to the primacy of elections and their position. The attitudes that parliamentarians have regarding DMPs seem to be influenced by the overall perception that MPs have about citizens’ levels of competence and their ability to decide on important matters. Three types of discourses are identified in this respect: “power-sharing” with high levels of perceived competence and open support for binding forms of deliberation, “consultation” with limited perceived competence, restricting to a consultative or local level, and “elitist”, perceiving citizens as incompetent, and rejecting any kind of participation outside elections (Rangoni et al., 2021).

While consensus exists on the fact that the attitudes of key policy actors on DMPs are “driven both by actors’ interests in the outcome on a micro-level and by their general ideas about political decision-making on a macro-level” (Niessen, 2019, p. 405), it is still up for debate what the specific factors influencing attitudes are. Rangoni et al. (2021) based on a study of Belgium’s parliamentarians posit that *positive attitudes* among parliamentarians *seem to be correlated with* previous experience of DMPs, having fewer mandates (being a relatively newer member of parliament), gender (female) and left-wing political ideology; while negative ones are associated with holding multiple offices, having had more than three parliamentary mandates (hence longer service in parliament), and right-wing political ideology. Niessen (2019), on the other hand, argues that it is the degree of approval towards the specific recommendations made by the DMP that determines the attitudes of policy actors.

Therefore, two mechanisms of opinion formation emerge: (1) an *a priori* mechanism, through which opinions about DMPs are largely shaped by the actor’s views of the process and the role that citizen participation should have in decision-making, and (2) an *a posteriori* mechanism, through which opinions are shaped by the results of the DMP and the degree to which they satisfy the actors’ interests.

- *A priori* aspects regard the selection procedure, the independence of the experts, and the deliberation process, or the citizens’ ability to discern and make recommendations in areas in which they don’t have expertise (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2020; Vrydagh et al., 2020), their ability to remain independent if approached by interested parties, and even the role that citizens should play in policy making in the first place. This would suggest that an important factor for gaining support among the policy actors is credibility of the process itself and comprehensive communication and outreach to the policy actors on the design and workings of the assembly and potentially offering an opportunity to input into the design, as well as for observing the CA or other involvement in it.
- *A posteriori* aspects consist mainly of the risk that the recommendations of the assembly could diverge from the interests of the commissioning authority (Elstub et al., 2021; Wells et al., 2021), the effects that the CA results could have on the public perception of existing or upcoming policies, or the degree of applicability of the recommendations (Ross et al., 2021; Torney, 2021).

Furthermore, attitudes towards DMPs can be impacted by the nature of the issue up for deliberation, and the political context surrounding the process. For climate assemblies, the nature of the issue generates both challenges and opportunities. One of the pervasive conceptions is that climate change is “too complex” for citizens to be able to make sound judgements on this issue (Niessen, 2019, p. 500). Some studies argue that CAs potentially offer a “pathway through these complexities” (Sandover et al., 2021, p. 81) by enabling the voicing of a diverse and representative set of argued opinions and informing policymakers on the public’s preferences, providing “a practical step for governments towards more inclusive, co-designed and collaborative governance” (Devaney et al., 2020, p. 145).

The political context in which the CAs take place can shape perceptions about the process and can, itself, constitute a barrier. A highly charged political context and low approval ratings for the commissioning authority are considered as detrimental, with a strong example coming from the failed CA proposal made by Julia Gillard in Australia (Boswell et al., 2013). The authors conclude that “the case demonstrates a resistance to democratic innovation” (Boswell et al., 2013, p. 175) that authors believe to be stemming from a long-standing federal tradition, but, more acutely, from the specific political context and the politicization on the climate change issue. These have enabled opposing parties to attack the CA proposal for political gains. Nonetheless, high political visibility has its advantages, as it can bring climate change higher up on the political agenda. Therefore, the balance between visibility and the mobilisation of stakeholders for and against CAs will “shape the impact that such processes have on the wider policy system” (Torney, 2021, p. 384).

Lastly, some studies suggest that the level and depth of knowledge that policy actors have regarding CAs varies considerably, depending on whether CAs or other types of DMPs have been organised in their country or in their constituencies before, as deliberative processes offer policy actors learning opportunities (Pinto, 2014). Even where previous DMPs have taken place, it is suggested that policy actors’ knowledge depends on their particular interests or on how well the previous processes have been mediated. Furthermore, the levels of knowledge also differ between types of policy actors (Niessen, 2019, pp. 488–489). This lack of knowledge represents a challenge in more ways than one – it makes it more difficult for CAs to get the attention and support of policy actors, it leaves room for misconceptions regarding a CA’s mandate and how it functions, and it allows for such misconceptions to be speculated for political gains (Boswell et al., 2013).

### 3.3. *Opportunities to address the barriers*

The literature on DMPs and CAs identifies opportunities for mitigating concerns about a priori and a posteriori factors. Knowledge and communication play a quintessential role in preference formation, and this holds true for the attitudes that policy actors have about CAs as well. Informed actors are expected to be more capable of identifying the benefits brought by CAs and to perceive them as an innovative, informative, and legitimizing tool, rather than as a threat to representative democracy and the political status quo.



At the same time, the characteristics of the commissioning authority can also impact attitudes towards CAs. While an independent authority can increase their perceived legitimacy (Boswell et al., 2013), CAs commissioned by political authorities are better coupled to the policymaking processes (Setälä, 2017) and are expected to be more impactful (Torney, 2021). Furthermore, Hendriks indicates that “designed coupling”, establishing a stronger relation with the commissioning authority while keeping authorities accountable for responding to recommendations improves both effectiveness and perceptions (Hendriks, 2016). Moreover, some scholars argue that normative shifts and major events can create opportunities for CAs. The COVID-19 pandemic and the crisis that ensued, for example, offer the context for reassessing the social contract, with deliberative mechanisms emerging as a “powerful way to build a social mandate for climate action post-COVID-19” (Howarth et al., 2020, p. 1113).

The following sections test and deepen some of these insights through the interviews with climate policy actors conducted for this project. The literature review was undertaken in parallel with the interviews, which were structured around open-ended questions with care taken to not lead the interview towards any specific concepts or hypothesis.

#### **4. How climate policy actors learn about CAs and knowledge gaps**

The interviews with climate policy actors conducted for this project showed mixed levels of knowledge about the CAs. While some actors were well informed on the essence of the assemblies as an instrument (mostly due to either having been involved in a related process or being interested in the topic of democracy in general), there was some level of confusion among others on how an assembly was different from the other forms of public engagement and participation. For example, some experts equated CAs with stakeholder consultation mechanisms. Where the level of confusion was increasingly greater is on the purpose and place of assemblies in the overall climate governance system. There was confusion on whether a CA was a decision-making or a consultative mechanism.

An interesting finding from the interviews concerns the learning mechanisms on climate assemblies among the climate policy actors. Most interviewees have reported learning about CAs as an instrument through the media, most often citing the example of the Irish Citizens Assembly as their first encounter with CAs, less frequently the French CCC. Most interviewed commissioners and policy makers that ended up supporting the initiation of the CA in their respective countries reported being informed and convinced of the benefits directly by a subject matter expert (often an academic or a deliberative democracy practitioner).

Asked about analytical and informational gaps about CAs, the top area that came up first in all interviews was improving understanding of and communication on the impacts of past CAs, as well as guidance on how to make them more impactful.

*This suggests that further targeted awareness raising among the climate policy actors, as well as greater attention to communication around assemblies and the role of the media are important areas for consideration for KNOCA and the climate assembly community at large. It also underscores the importance of continued attention to the rigorous and comparable assessment of the impact of CAs and guidance for future climate assemblies.*

## 5. Perceived benefits of citizens assemblies by climate policy actors

The discussion on the benefits of the CAs as seen by climate policy actors was overall in line with the expectations in the literature on the DMPs. Experts highlighted the following benefits of climate assemblies:

- Bringing in tacit knowledge or lived experience to ensure policies don't miss the issues that are 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.
- May help improve trust in parliaments, governments, and politicians.
- Make clear the public appetite for ambitious action; challenging the views on what is possible and would be supported by the public.
- Give people a sense of democratic empowerment.
- A way to test what is possible politically.

### Box 1: Representative quotes from the interviews on benefits of the CAs

- *"This method is the one that opens the door into public deliberation or citizen engagement. This is where decision makers at the moment hang their hat when they want citizen engagement. So you take that method and you try to make the best of it", CA expert.*
- *"The added value is to get people engaging with the complexity of the issue to a greater extent than even politicians do... And the advantage of assembly is that it's the view of a representative group of people who are not political", parliament staff.*
- *"[CAs] 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 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 those the government have, and they did", CA commissioner.*
- *"CA has a tremendous breakthrough power in terms of making very clear the public appetite for ambitious action, maybe sweeping aside certain received wisdom from the policy community about what is possible and would be supported by the public", policy expert.*
- *"One of the most important [CA] 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 the UK Parliament.*

Source: Expert interviews.



## 6. Misconceptions and concerns around assemblies among climate policy actors

The discussion of the barriers to and misconceptions around CAs as seen by climate policy actors has confirmed but also delivered additional insights to the analysis of the literature.

Several interviewees talked about their own reservations around the assemblies, while others cited arguments brought up by critics they had previously directly engaged with.

The first group of arguments relate to questioning the capability of ordinary citizens to debate and offer useful recommendations on a complex issue of climate change (see Box 2) and included the following views and concerns:

- Don't ask a lay person, ask the experts!
- People can't handle discussing a complex issue
- Citizens are naive or subject to lobbyist influences
- Citizens themselves distrust their own capabilities of tackling these topics.

### Box 2: Illustrative quotes on misconceptions around the abilities of citizens

- *“Are these people equipped? I wouldn't want my neighbour taking part in that.’- That's a very common first reaction to the idea. The more we talk about the learning phase and the deliberation phase and the professional facilitation and the careful curation of evidence and so on, that really helps”, CA expert.*
- *“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”, CA expert.*

Source: Expert interviews.

Another set of concerns, in particularly expressed by the NGOs, relates to the potential negative impact of CAs on the pace and ambition of climate action. The arguments here included fear of unpredictability and the risk of lower ambition in the recommendations; the risk that citizens may not get on board with net zero objectives and that the assemblies would make it more difficult to go on that journey. Some saw CAs as risking slowing down policy making and implementation of agreed climate goals. This argument has been voiced publicly in France in the lead up to the CCC, but several civil society experts from different countries also raised this concern in the interviews.

Consequently, objections or no support from civil society was raised in several interviews as one key barrier to the impact of CAs. Some interviewees were also concerned that climate change was a topic that was too divisive to effectively tackle via a citizen's assembly, unless the question (or the CA's remit) was very specific and narrow. There was a predominant perception among the interviewees that right wing and conservative parties were generally less supportive of democratic renewal processes and citizen engagement, while several experts explicitly talked about CA's being seen by the political establishment as a product of the 'green lobby'. The latter argument came up at

a workshop, where representatives from a UK NGO shared their challenges in using the results of Climate Assembly UK when talking to officials from the Conservative party, where the mention of the assembly would often be dismissed on similar grounds and would become “counterproductive to the argument”. As a result, this NGO “stopped mentioning the assembly in such conversations”.

Other issues raised related to the lack of clarity on the purpose of CAs and concerns around its place in the overall climate governance system (see Box 4). On the one hand some actors are wary of the assembly challenging established decision-making channels in democracies, in particular the role of parliament (see Box 3). The fear of losing control and power came up in particular in relation to the members of parliament and policy makers, however, several NGO representatives were also dubious about the added value of the CA in the climate governance system, highlighting the importance of clarity over the purpose of the assembly and having realistic expectations around the follow-up. Yet some actors expressing critical views towards CAs in this context seemed to assume that the assembly would be taking decisions rather than making recommendations. In this context there was also a view that inflated attention to the assemblies may be detrimental to other channels for public participation and hence may discourage participation in climate policy overall.

### **Box 3: Illustrative quotes on the place of CAs in climate and overall governance system**

- *“This division between representative democracy and otherwise deliberative democracy can actually be very dangerous. It really can strengthen this message: We are the people, those on top don't listen to us, and we need panels/assemblies as a solution”,* EU civil society expert.
- *“Political parties are very happy if you come and try to join them. And in that sense, CAs tend to be harmful because they tell a different story. They tell the story that engagement is mostly through CAs and anything else doesn't exist. They take up too much of the public debate”,* civil society expert.
- *“It's difficult. We want citizen assembly to make proposals, but we want those proposals to be implemented. But if we say we want them to be implemented, it means that we don't want a Parliament to have a role”,* civil society expert.
- *“These people are advisors [CAs] they are not elected. So simply by that fact, they can't have the power to take decisions”,* civil society expert.
- *“I would not empower citizen assembly to define from scratch a new policy tool. I think CA is a good way of opening up a debate, opening up a space of policy options. But eventually the voting power relies always on elected representatives”,* civil society expert.
- *“If a Parliament or government says, we disagree with the recommendation from citizens, we have a different take and we don't like it for this and that reason, that is legitimate. And if that is understood, then CAs are helpful. If that is not understood and if there's expectation on CAs making decisions, then I would say it's really harmful”,* civil society expert.
- *“Some MPs were more dubious about it, partly because they didn't know really much about citizens assemblies, but also the instant response from many MPs was, why do we need the Citizens Assembly? We are the Citizens Assembly. We're elected parliamentarians.... We had to really sell it as an instrument to help policy making that wasn't replacing their decision-making responsibility, it was informing their own decisions”,* Parliament staff.

Source: Expert interviews.

Useful insights also came up on the perceived risks of climate assemblies. In addition to the fear of lower ambition discussed earlier, there were concerns around the credibility of the process and weak or lack of political follow-up, which several experts saw as potentially detrimental for climate governance and overall public trust and support for ambitious climate action. Furthermore, given that the CA process cannot be fully open and accessible, there is a strong need for finding other additional ways for engaging citizens (including former members of the CAs). There was a concern among the climate policy experts that the lack of prior experience with holding assemblies in many countries and funding limitations would lead to badly managed processes or to the CAs not being suitable for the purposes, which may discredit the instrument in the long run. Lack of clear mandate and mismatched expectations around what can be done in terms of budget and impact of the assembly, as well as false expectations that the CA is taking decisions rather than making recommendations, were mentioned as other risks.

#### **Box 4: Illustrative quotes on the purpose of the CAs**

- *“Yes, it [CA] can help to understand public opinion, but politicians tend to pick what they like, and that is not really about understanding public opinion but more about reinforcing your own position.”* EU civil society expert.
- *“It [CA] gives an impression of public consultation, openness, for we're not doing it behind your back... The reality is that basically you design the whole thing in such a way that you can push the policy and the decision that you have decided to push, but you do it in a way that will not trigger massive rejection... At the end of the day, no politician wants a policy that would trigger mass rejection, sudden rejection, so you get a view on what the potential impulse in society will be”,* former senior politician and civil servant.
- *“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.
- *“You can't anticipate what's going to come out of this process or direct or misdirect people into going in a particular direction. 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”,* CA organiser.

Source: Expert interviews.

Finally, many interviewees spoke about the importance of their respective political context, which is in line with the expectation in the academic literature. Experts felt that the appropriateness and effectiveness of CAs as a climate governance instrument was linked among other things to the pre-existing public opinion in the country on CAs specifically and on climate change more broadly. Factors named as playing in favour of support from climate policy actors for a CA were a requirement to hold an assembly integrated into climate legislation or executive policy; overall mounting pressure for increased public engagement and participation (e.g. as was the case in France); previous experience with citizens assemblies and a strong overall sentiment towards democratic revival (e.g. in the case of France or Denmark). Factors playing against support for CAs were divided political space on climate change and lack of previous experience in this area.

Some useful specific examples raised include:

- **France:** divide in the climate movement with newcomers like Fridays for the Future being supportive of the CA, and established environmental NGOs initially seeing it as 'a way out'
- **Finland:** XR and others challenging the climate policy making message 'don't ask the citizens what to do, ask the experts'
- **Ireland:** A general understanding of the benefits of reaching beyond the usual group because most of the population are not motivated to participate in a public consultation
- **UK:** To address the MP's reservations, the proponents emphasised innovation-related arguments: CA was new for Westminster, high profile and would have an impact on policy; by holding a CA UK would be getting ahead, not staying behind other countries doing CAs
- **Spain:** Risks of CA getting high prominence in the context of the coalition government and divisive political environment on climate change issues.

## 7. Challenges and opportunities for using climate assemblies in the context of EU climate policy

A specific segment in the interviews concerned the potential for CAs in the context of European climate policy. The experts were asked whether they saw any opportunities (and specific challenges) in this context. It was interesting that most interviewees, even those who were expert on the issue of CAs, admitted not having thought about the European level. At the time of the interviews the Conference on the Future of Europe was still on-going, and the few interviewees who had followed the news around it were sceptical that something useful for climate policy would come out of the Conference (citing it as a useful precedent but being too broad). Yet there was a general feeling that the growth of social movements on climate change over the past several years has instilled the fear among policy actors of backlash and delay to climate action, which overall leads to more willingness in considering ways to foster societal acceptance. In this context, CAs are increasingly seen as an important instrument for helping achieve social legitimacy at different levels.

There were also a few comments about the EU policy operation being challenging and inefficient making it difficult for a European-level CA to have impact. As a policy expert argued, "*The EU seems to be almost averse to the idea of having the Commission engaging deeply with civil society and the public*". Yet they also highlighted the importance of not giving up on public engagement: "*Prioritising pricing is going to expose European climate policy to a huge public backlash, and it could end up being a gift to populist parties who blame climate policies for impoverishment and disenfranchisement. If the public do not feel consulted in the context of escalating cost of living, [governments] are going to be dealing with very angry populations in the not-too-distant future, which will just bring more political instability.*"

Another specific challenge mentioned by several experts in the context of a potential European climate assembly, is its place in the climate governance system, namely questioning what would be an appropriate institution to commission it, and most importantly, which institution would have the power to act on the recommendations. At the practical level it was noted that most EU-focused

climate NGOs are absorbed with other issues and have little capacity to focus on citizen engagement and CA issues.

While some experts felt that an EU-level assembly might be useful to deal with an even greater disconnect between politicians and citizens at that level, it was noted that such assembly would need a very focused topic: e.g. adaptation tools, measures and policies; social justice issues around climate policy; food security and energy security around carbon neutrality. There was a view that a combination of national level and European level CAs could strengthen each other, but that it would require serious planning to make sure that they don't interfere with each other. Furthermore, for any European CA it would be important to ensure the diversity of voices, not only coming from the western and northern Europe. Some interviewees proposed considering a series of national assemblies that deal with a European question.

Speaking of the opportunities, the interviewees mentioned specific openings in the EU Governance regulation. Public participation and engagement is required under the EU Governance regulation at the European and Member States (MS) level. For example, Art. 10 of the Governance regulation on national energy and climate plans (NECPs) states that each MS *"shall ensure that the public is given early and effective opportunities to participate in the preparation of the draft integrated national energy and climate plan..., in the preparation of the final plan well before its adoption – as well as of the long-term strategies"*. It also requires that MS ensure that the public is informed. Art. 11 requires each MS to establish a permanent multi-level climate and energy dialogue, in which local authorities, civil society organisations, business community, investors and other relevant stakeholders and the general public are able actively to engage and discuss the different scenarios envisaged for energy and climate policies. These provisions may offer opportunities, and the need for ensuring that the public engagement processes to be put in place are more deliberative in nature, hence fostering CA culture. Some members of the European Climate Governance Hub supported by ECF have tried to include a call for the EU Multilevel Climate and Energy Dialogue platforms to become more permanent and deliberative processes (similar to turning them into a permanent CA). Currently there are no guidelines or reporting requirements.

## **8. Recommendations for overcoming the barriers and considerations for KNOCA strategy**

Limited engagement of climate policy actors with climate assemblies to date to a large extent can be explained by the persistent lack of understanding of the potential CA benefits and purpose by the climate community. The perceived weak political impact of previous assemblies' recommendations raises concerns that CAs are little more than a fashionable trend that may detract from the urgency of implementation. Several misconceptions of the value of citizen engagement and public participation at large and its place in the climate governance system, as well as most of the funding and effort in the civil society being concentrated on other issues, lead to a lack of political champions pushing for meaningful public participation in climate policy, including for follow-up to the climate assemblies. This augments the vicious circle of CAs having low political impact.

Based on these insights KNOCA has potentially a clear role to play in addressing the misconceptions and knowledge gaps and engaging with climate community, in particular around the purpose, benefits and impacts climate assemblies.



Specifically, there is a need for KNOCA and citizen assembly community at large to:

- Better articulate the value of involving the public in climate policy discussions, including the potential timings, suitable mandates, etc. in different political contexts. KNOCA has started work in this direction, but should consider whether more specific guidance can be produced focusing less on the process of the assembly and more on the linkages to politics (including sequencing of the CA in the political cycle).
- Add more clarity on the respective role of the CAs in the climate governance ecosystem, including considering the role of the CA:
  - versus parliaments and civil servants (consultation versus decision-making), including analysis of the past climate assemblies in this respect and the added value different policy actors saw from the past assemblies.
  - alongside an independent expert body on climate change, citizens opinions, stakeholder consultation bodies and how the results should be a compromise of all of this
  - wider engagement activities feeding into an assembly process with a question informed by some of those engagements.
- Consider further targeted awareness raising among climate policy actors, as well as greater attention to communication around the assemblies and the role of the media (consistent with KNOCA's on-going work and strategic discussions).
- Continue paying attention to rigorous and comparable assessment of CA's impact and guidance for future assemblies on realising impact.
- Consider communication and outreach to policy actors on the design and workings of assemblies and recommending to CA organisers potentially offering policy actors an opportunity to input into the design, as well as observing the CA or other involvement, based on the findings on the importance of credibility of the process being an important a priori factor for gaining support among the policy actors.
- Consider whether institutionalization of CAs could be a means to foster longer-term transformation and greater impact or would make the instrument of CA more rigid and less effective (views varied on this, with critics citing experience of the some of the permanent European consultative bodies).
- Emphasise the importance of managing citizens' and climate community's expectations to reduce the risk of backlash: "make it clear they are not defining a new national policy, they are defining a potential new national policy that will have to be discussed and undergo a normal legislative procedure".
- Address concerns over the CA process being too closed, by providing guidance to assembly organizers on the ways in which it could involve the wider public without compromising integrity (e.g. making draft proposals public, creating a stakeholder group that interacts with the CA, for example in Austria, etc. ).
- Consider how KNOCA and other actors can help reach out to and enable the climate community to engage with CAs more effectively. This may include producing specific guidance on engaging policy actors for the CA organizers; production of more targeted analytical and outreach materials on the benefits; etc.



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