How can citizens’ assemblies help navigate the systemic transformations required by the polycrisis?

Learnings and recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and civil society

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Draft Briefing

This draft briefing has been prepared for the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformation (CAST).

This briefing is intended to help policymakers, practitioners, researchers and civil society actors consider how citizens’ assemblies can address underlying systemic issues at the heart of a genuinely transformative response to the environmental and social crises facing the planet today.

This draft is made available in advance of the workshop organised by the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA), which will take place on May 23rd 2023. The purpose of the workshop is to explore this briefing with the KNOCA community.

The authors of this briefing will consider revisions in light of the feedback, evidence and ideas from the broader KNOCA community.

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1. Introduction

Multiple UN bodies\(^1\) have expressed the urgent need for systemic transformations to maintain the favourable and reliable environmental conditions that underlie modern civilisation. Backed up by social movements\(^2\) wide-ranging issues such as food, travel, and consumption are now commonly recognised as crucial to address climate and ecological crises.

However, policy processes have thus far been slow to address these crises with a systems lens. In many countries, there has been little to no progress in reducing emissions or reversing the degradation of nature.

Such inaction has contributed to increasing recognition that deeper social issues such as inequality, polarisation, and even the fundamentals of current political and economic models, are intertwined with environmental degradation in an advancing ‘polycrisis’\(^4\) which includes a crisis of governance.

"Limiting global warming to 1.5° Celsius would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society."

**IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C** (2018)

"Goals for conserving and sustainably using nature and achieving sustainability cannot be met by current trajectories, and goals for 2030 and beyond may only be achieved through transformative changes across economic, social, political and technological factors."

**IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services** (2019)

 Citizens’ assemblies (CAs) are chief among a range of participatory democratic tools considered to have potential for addressing the numerous technically and morally complex problems at the root of the polycrisis. As the crisis becomes more salient in public consciousness, climate citizens’ assemblies have gained particular traction in the past few years, with new initiatives being announced almost every week\(^5\). However, many processes in this deliberative wave have struggled to address system-level aspects of the climate crisis, its connections to other crises and societal issues, or the trade-offs inherent in a transformed, sustainable future.

Guidance on how to design and evaluate deliberative processes on the climate crisis has become available in a short space of time, thanks to networks such as KNOCA\(^6\). But few resources are currently available on how to design deliberative processes, climate or otherwise,

\(^1\) [https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6wg3/pdf/IPCC_AR6_WGIII_SummaryForPolicymakers.pdf](https://report.ipcc.ch/ar6wg3/pdf/IPCC_AR6_WGIII_SummaryForPolicymakers.pdf)

\(^2\) “System change, not climate change!” • Inside Story

\(^3\) Climate strikes: Greta Thunberg calls for ‘system change not climate change’ – here’s what that could look like

\(^4\) What is a global polycrisis? - Cascade Institute For the purpose of this briefing, the global polycrisis is defined as the causal entanglement of crises in multiple global systems that significantly degrade humanity’s prospects.


\(^6\) [https://knoca.eu/](https://knoca.eu/)
that open discussion on the broader systemic transformations that are increasingly recognised as necessary to address many deep-rooted problems.

This briefing note is intended to help policymakers, practitioners, researchers and other civil society actors consider **how citizens’ assemblies can address underlying systemic issues** at the heart of a genuinely transformative response to the environmental and social crises facing the planet today.

It will focus on **power literacy** as the key element that allows practitioners to understand how citizens’ assemblies can grapple with systemic aspects of present crises. It will illuminate the relationship between citizens’ assemblies, power, and systemic transformations through tangible examples, focusing on three previous high-profile climate assemblies that the authors had direct involvement in: the United Kingdom’s Climate Assembly (CAUK), France’s Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (CCC), and the first transnational citizens’ assembly on the climate and ecological crisis, the Global Assembly (GA), and to a lesser extent other processes such as the Scottish Climate Assembly.

It will then explore what learnings, challenges, and opportunities these and other experiences reveal, and offer guidance on how both policymakers and other civil society actors might design climate citizens’ assemblies to open possibilities for systemic solutions to the polycrisis.

If you would like to learn more about citizens’ assemblies and their strengths and weaknesses in the context of climate change, please see CAST Briefing Paper 3⁷. And for an overview of national climate assemblies in Europe, see KNOCA’s website⁸.

### 2. Climate Citizens’ Assemblies and systemic transformation: understanding power

It is impossible to explore how citizens’ assemblies can facilitate systemic transformations without first understanding how societal change happens - and particularly in the case of the climate crisis, why there has been limited traction in bringing about meaningful change despite significant political attention.

Power is unavoidably at the heart of this issue, for two reasons. Firstly, not everyone has equal influence over the decisions that orient society’s future course. Secondly, some types of influence are more obvious and visible than others. This is important, because a shallow interrogation of power can lead to incorrect conclusions about the efficacy of a democratic intervention to facilitate progress on systemic aspects of crises.

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⁸ [KNOCA](https://example.com/KNOCA)
There are many ways of analysing power. For the purposes of this briefing, John Gaventa’s Power Cube offers a helpful framework to visualise the spaces that influence societal transformation, the levels at which this can occur, and the forms of power each space can have.

![Power Cube Diagram]

**Figure 1: John Gaventa’s Power Cube**

First, we can think in terms of the different spaces that exist for decision-making. In the case of closed spaces, these entail the decisions that governments, once elected, make on behalf of citizens without their further input. Legislation is regularly passed in this way. Urgent responses to emergencies such as the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic would also fall under this category.

Invited spaces are those in which citizens are asked to participate by various kinds of authorities, generally within set parameters. Citizens’ assemblies mandated by power holders such as legislative or executive bodies (i.e. Parliament or Head of State) would fall under this category. Government-sanctioned consultations on policy areas are also invited spaces.

Claimed or created spaces are those in which typically less powerful actors come together to shape and act on their own agendas, independent of institutionalised power-holders. These spaces can operate at and have impacts on local, national, or global scales. Protests and citizens’ assemblies organised independently of governments are examples of these spaces.

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10 Can citizen deliberation address the climate crisis? Not if it is disconnected from politics and policymaking. John Boswell, Rikki Dean, & Graham Smith (2022).
13 Image source: https://www.semanticscholar.org/paper/Refugees-Flexing-Social-Power-as-Agents-of-Creating-Larkin-Clark/3341c9517668a8e2930875c32b08b678351e91f
Most importantly for this briefing, these spaces can wield multiple forms of power - visible, hidden or invisible. The relatively closed, institutional decision-making spaces of governments have visible political power, resulting in the making and implementing of policy. But these spaces, closed or invited, also have hidden power, in that decision-makers can control which actors have a place at the decision-making table, what issues are up for discussion, and how this is done. This political agenda-setting affects how problems are constructed, and therefore what courses of action are proposed.

2.1 Power and “invited” citizens’ assemblies

Typically, citizens’ assemblies have tended to be spaces ‘invited’ by local, regional, or national governments, to inform policy discussion in a visible way. A common assumption made is that these “invited” assemblies are more likely to lead to policy change because of the formal mandate they get from the commissioning bodies (i.e. a local authority, a parliament, the executive). But while useful, the more hidden power of the commissioning bodies to set the agenda and terms of reference for these spaces often limits their scope, perceived legitimacy, and decision-making power.

This can pose obstacles to dealing with ‘wicked’ problems such as the present environmental crises. The short-term pressures of electoral cycles may predispose against the implementation or even discussion of genuinely transformative changes to social, political, and economic systems, because their benefits are unlikely to be realised within the next election cycle. Instead, the options under consideration are likely to involve short-term sacrifices or trade-offs, particularly for the high-income countries that have benefited most from the Industrial Revolution and colonialism.

The guiding question for the British Climate Assembly (CAUK) for example was to explore how the UK should meet its already legislated target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, with the majority of policy recommendations deliberated on by assembly members being developed by experts in advance without any input provided from the assembly members. This limited the scope of recommendations that citizens were able to propose, and framed the issue as a long-term and technical matter that did not fundamentally alter social or economic structures, rather than one requiring near-term and urgent action with implications for wider society.

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15 The notion of ‘hidden’ power does not imply this is covert or operates in bad faith, rather it tends not to be acknowledged or even explicitly considered by those wielding it.
17 Democratic deliberation for sustainability transformations: between constructiveness and disruption, Marit Hammond (2020).
Other climate deliberation has incorporated wider concerns into the guiding question for discussion. For example, the French Convention Citoyenne asked how to reduce emissions “in the spirit of social justice”. However, promises by President Macron of unfiltered incorporation into policy of CCC recommendations were not met. This exercising of power effectively blocked some of the CCC’s most transformative proposals.

Industry lobbyists are also likely to attempt to influence the scope and power of citizens’ assemblies that pose a financial or reputational risk to their business, as was the case with the process of creation of the French Climate and Resilience bill (2021)\(^\text{19}\) that was inspired by the Convention Citoyenne’s recommendations. As explained in a report published in 2021 by Observatoire des Multinationales\(^\text{20}\), various industries embarked on an all-out, and ultimately successful lobbying offensive to have the Convention’s recommendations either removed or watered down in the drafting of the final bill, drawing on all their influence and invisible (to wider society) power, including at the very heart of government.

Ultimately, there is a real risk that citizens’ assemblies initiated by power holders lead to citizens’ assemblies that inform but are not able to challenge these power structures. In the worst cases, citizens’ assemblies can end up providing legitimacy to systems and politicians who are looking to maintain the status quo, and help them continue to avoid hard political choices\(^\text{21}\). Some argue for instance that citizens’ assemblies and other deliberative mini-publics to date have been blind to and/or complicit in maintaining the privileges and power structures of western democratic theory and practice, as well as the dependencies on systems of domination, racialization and exploitation\(^\text{22}\).

It is therefore crucial for any citizens’ assembly mandated by a power holder that is serious about facilitating deliberation on system change to be aware of these biases, and to mitigate against them. At a minimum, this requires awareness building so that citizens possess a sense of their own right to express their voice and to understand the systemic underpinnings of the climate and ecological crisis. It also needs strong capacities for exercising countervailing power against the ‘rules of the game’ that favour entrenched interests. Without this, new mechanisms for participation may be captured by prevailing interests.

In the table below, we highlight elements of different citizens’ assemblies that are influenced by hidden or invisible power. We look at two critical components of the design of climate citizens’ assemblies: the questions for deliberation and the framing of climate change (i.e. climate discourses) as a means of illustrating how power has operated to shape these processes to date. We use the following definitions of hidden and invisible power\(^\text{23}\) to inform our analysis:

\(^{19}\) Loi climat et résilience : l’écologie dans nos vies
\(^{20}\) Who’s After the French Citizens’ Climate Convention? - Multinationals Observatory
\(^{21}\) The legacy and impact - KNOCA
\(^{23}\) Adapted by Just Associates from VeneKlæsen and Miller (2002) - Source: Gaventa power cube. Finding the Spaces for Change: A Power Analysis
**Hidden power:** setting the political agenda. Certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence by controlling who is able to be involved in decision-making and which topics are on the agenda. These dynamics operate on many levels to elevate the concerns of some groups while excluding or devaluing the concerns and representation of other less powerful groups.

**Invisible power:** shaping meaning and what is acceptable. Invisible power shapes the cultural and ideological boundaries of participation. Significant problems and issues, or framings of the problem, are not only kept from the decision-making table, but also from the consciousness and consideration of the different parties involved, even those directly affected by a problem. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world and giving a particular slant on society in the context of the climate and ecological crisis, this form of power shapes people’s beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of the status quo.

### Questions for deliberation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Climate Assembly UK (CAUK)</th>
<th>How should the UK meet its target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050?</th>
<th>The question was set at an early stage by the commissioning Select Committees of CAUK(^24). It was clearly and deliberately aligned with national policy priorities, and was oriented towards practical, actionable responses. It nevertheless frames the issue as a long-timescale and technical matter, rather than one requiring near-term and urgent action with implications for wider society.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Convention Citoyenne Climat (CCC)</td>
<td>How can France reduce its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 40% (in relation to 1990’s levels) by 2030, in the spirit of social justice?</td>
<td>The question was negotiated between the civil society group “Gilets Citoyens” and representatives from the government(^25). Reference to social justice enables an acknowledgement of some broader implications. By using the term ‘at least’ the opportunity was given to the 150 Convention’s citizens to go further than 40% reduction GHG emissions. See table 2 for further analysis of the handling of controversies in CCC. The question nevertheless maintains a framing largely in technical terms, as in the case of CAUK.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scottish Climate Assembly (SCA)</td>
<td>How should Scotland change to tackle the climate</td>
<td>The Stewarding Group worked on the remit of the Assembly in a half-day deliberative process.(^26)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{24}\) [Citizens' Climate Assemblies: Understanding public deliberation for climate policy](https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03675058/document) - Chapter 2: Scope and remit of climate deliberation: The guiding question: background and implications.  
\(^{25}\) [Scotland's Climate Assembly - process, impact and assembly member experience: research report - gov.scot](https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03675058/document)
According to Oliver Escobar, one of the members of the Stewarding Group, the process of developing the framing question was “dialogic and towards the end deliberative” and “an accommodation across different interests” but “in an ideal world, participants themselves will then have a say in that process as well. But that's not how all of these assemblies are designed just now. This was somewhere in between the ideal and the pragmatic”.27

| Global Assembly (GA) | How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way? | The question was developed by the Knowledge and Wisdom Committee (KWC) of the GA through an iterative process over several meetings. There was a clear recognition from the Committee that climate change and biodiversity loss had to be tackled together, because the nature and climate crises are two sides of the same coin. A changing climate means changing habitats. This in turn further intensifies the effects of climate change, which cause biodiversity loss. This was the first time that a deliberative process looked at both crises in an interconnected way28 and this was reflected in all the evidence (i.e. learning materials, experts and witness testimonies2930) the Assembly members explored during the learning phase. This decision was driven by the representatives from Original Nations, indigenous wisdom keepers in the KWC of the GA, and by Professor Bob Watson, former Chair of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). With regards to the second part of the framing question, the intention was to support deliberation on the concepts of fairness and effectiveness, and what they meant in relation to the climate and ecological crisis. The purpose of the process was not to come up with specific policy recommendations but to facilitate meta deliberation31 on global justice and goals as defined by John Dryzek and Ana Tanasoca in their seminal book “Democratising global justice, deliberating global

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27 Interview of Oliver Escobar “A deliberative process is about unlearning the habits of a public sphere that has been geared towards polarization” | Wilder Journal by Platonig
28 All national and local citizens’ assemblies so far have tackled the issues of climate change and biodiversity as separate topics (e.g. Ireland, the UK etc. see: Citizens’ assemblies worldwide)
29 Information Booklet | Global Assembly
30 Global Assembly Witness Speakers - YouTube
31 Meta-deliberation: everyday acts of critical reflection in deliberative systems - Markus Holdo, 2020
The framing of climate change (i.e. climate discourses and narratives)

| CAUK | Climate change was framed and presented in ways that emphasised scientific and technical framings, at times side-lining the social, moral and political contexts of climate action. | Framing in terms of factual information and technology options risks omitting topic areas which are inherent to tackling climate change, such as questions of political economy, power and influence. This was articulated as a concern by CAUK expert lead Rebecca Willis: “I feel like I should spell [this] out, that as ever in the climate debate, there was a reluctance amongst the organisers and speakers to talk about the... power issues... [There is] the tendency to frame it as ‘which technology should we pick?’, rather than, ‘where does the money and the power and the influence lie, and where does it need to lie, if we’re going to crack this one?’” |
| CCC | The mandate of the CCC defined the climate problem in terms of rate of GHG emissions reduction, calling for deliberation on the most polluting sectors of activity. A typology of the Convention’s measures was developed by a researcher: generic sectoral, technical, sobriety, economic regulation, and fundamental. | The typology shows that certain formulations of the climate problems have remained dominant. The numerical and consensual approach to climate change and the procedural difficulties of dealing with conflicts within the Convention, have favoured the development of measures of a generic sectoral and technical type. For the first two types of measures, called “generic sectoral” and “technical”, climate change is understood as a quantifiable problem (e.g. reduction of GHG emission rates). The task for the Convention members was either to opt for different technical solutions (technical proposals), or to contribute their knowledge to improve the way these measures are implemented or to increase their social acceptability (generic sectoral proposals). With the “sobriety” and “economic regulation” measures, climate change raises more deep-seated issues of economic and social organisation, and of the definition of freedom: it is a space of ideological and social conflicts. Finally, in the “fundamental” measures, the climate problem is considered in all its emotional and ethical dimensions. The resulting proposals, while less |

32 [Democratizing Global Justice: Deliberating Global Goals](#)
33 [Citizens’ Climate Assemblies: Understanding public deliberation for climate policy](#) - Chapter 2: Framing climate change - page 22
34 [Une participation entre technique et politique. Typologie des mesures de la Convention citoyenne pour le climat](#) | Cairn.info |
Table 1: Elements of citizens’ assemblies that are influenced by hidden or invisible power

2.2 Invisible power: a new function to explore for citizens’ assemblies

Given institutions’ track record on environmental action to date, it is prudent to assume that without external pressure, in most cases, institutions will not design citizens’ assemblies with the capacity to address systemic transformations, and/or will cherry pick their recommendations and leave the most transformative ones aside.

Invisible power is likely to exert a crucial and as yet largely unexplored role in inhibiting citizens’ assemblies as tools for systemic transformation. Invisible power manifests in how citizens think about their place in the world, including to what degree they should participate in societal decision-making, and how. It represents the broader cultural, psychological and ideological context within which political agendas are set and decisions are made.

This invisible power has profound implications for how citizens’ assemblies are set up and how they are run. It affects what is considered ‘legitimate’, ‘radical’ or ‘unacceptable’ in their framing and the types of information citizens consider. For example, a state’s ideological standpoint on

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whether unlimited growth is desirable (or even possible) for industrialised economies has a major influence on the kinds of policies within state-sanctioned deliberation available to address climate and related crises. This is illustrated in table 2 below, in the particular case of the CCC and its engagement (or lack thereof) with the subject of degrowth.

"A spectre is haunting our society: the spectre of degrowth", degrowth scholars Liegey et al. wrote in response to how the term (décroissance) was recurrently used “with fear and loathing” in the public debate surrounding the CCC report’s publication36. In his address to the CCC members, on June 29th 2021 at the Elysee Palace37, E.Macron praised their supposed willingness to “turn their back on degrowth”, stating: “I believe, like you, that this would not be an answer to the challenge we face. […] if we produce less, work less, we will no longer be able to finance the social model that we have. […] A model of degrowth is also a model of degrowth of our social model”. Instead, he argued for “individual responsibility”, “change of behaviours” and “consumer choices”, as well as for technological progress as “the prime pillar that reconciles economy and ecology, which you are endorsing and in which I believe”. He concluded: “I believe in the growth of our economy, I believe in a model that innovates”.

Despite the fact that the Convention’s process was shaped by citizens much more than any other climate citizens’ assemblies, the process still did not allow, for example, discussion about the political economy and critical societal indicators such as GDP in connection with alternative models of development, oil and gas subsidies, the financial system, or the leverage that banks or pensions schemes have in the climate and ecological crisis. At Weekend 1 of the Convention Citoyenne (in October 2019) all 25 tables (150 citizens) spontaneously brought up the issue of using GDP as a metric. This was the key message coming from the 25 tables: "the obsession with growth, GDP indicators and the logic of profits is a blocker to the transition. The logic of financial interest takes precedence over the common interest"38. This was identified at the very start of the process when exploring levers and blockers of change. And this was done before the citizens had heard any evidence from experts on the climate and ecological crisis.

Emmanuel Macron, in his speech on June 29th 2021, provided an unequivocal response to the Convention's recommendations. But because the Convention’s process was never designed to support meaningful deliberation on transformative economics, Emmanuel Macron’s interpretation of the citizens’ deliberation was done within the confines of a particular political agenda.39

Table 2: The degrowth discursive context of the Convention Citoyenne Climat40

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36 Un spectre hante notre société: celui de la décroissance | Le Club
37 Emmanuel Macron dit oui à 146 propositions de la Convention citoyenne pour le climat | Élysée
38 Points de blocages identifiés par les membres de la Convention page 1: In French: “[l’]obsession pour la croissance, les indicateurs de PIB et la logique de bénéfice est un frein à la transition. Ils constatent que la logique d’intérêt financier prime sur l’intérêt commun”.
40 https://lup.lub.lu.se/luur/download?func=downloadFile&recordOId=9047776&fileOId=9047782
Political institutions have substantial invisible power to influence how prevalent citizens’ assemblies are constituted, and how they are perceived.

In their commitment to neutrality and impartiality, the vast majority of climate citizens’ assemblies have declined to build links to social movements, NGOs, or other citizen groups in society. They have also reinforced a technocratic-managerial and depoliticized approach to climate policies — in effect undermining the possibility of systemic transformation. The main mechanism used to create a connection with social movements has been the inclusion of representatives from groups such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) in the governance structures of these assemblies (e.g. stewardship committees or oversight / advisory panels), with mixed results such as with the Climate Assembly in the London Borough of Southwark and Scotland’s climate assembly. In this case, representatives from XR Scotland were invited to join the stewarding committee of the Scottish Climate Citizens’ Assembly. However, just before the start of the Assembly, in November 2020, the XR representatives decided to leave the committee arguing that the governance of the Assembly, its design and delivery model had in built biases which were preventing the process from addressing the systemic roots of the climate crisis.

Citizens’ assemblies informed by and connected with NGOs, social movements, and other civil society actors have the potential to visualise and normalise the potential for citizen participation to navigate systemic transformations. If supported by non-state actors with the capacity to amplify and/or enact recommendations, such citizens’ assemblies could also manifest such potential without having to be entirely dependent on the ‘filter’ of governments. Rather than view the involvement of social movements as biased, authors such as Donatella della Porta have explored in detail the potential for social movements to progress democratic innovations. Most recently, the book “Reclaiming Participatory Governance: Social Movements and the Reinvention of Democratic Innovation”, edited by Sonia Bussu and Adrian Bua, offers empirical and theoretical perspectives on how the relationship between social movements and state institutions is emerging and developing through new modes of participatory governance.

At the nation-state level, the norm is for a citizens’ assembly to have a mandate from a politician, or a political body. This figurehead or institution prompts a question for discussion and then decides how to respond to the citizens’ recommendations. That is, most citizens' assemblies are top down, initiated by governments or legislatures. The Global Assembly was the opposite. It was a bottom up initiative conceived in collaboration with social movements and supported by various actors from civil society.

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41 Closing the Gap Between Citizen Participation and Mainstream Politics - Carnegie Europe
43 Extinction Rebellion hits out at Scotland's climate change citizen assembly - BBC News
44 Extinction Rebellion: Why we’re walking away from Citizens’ Assembly on climate | The National
45 https://cosmos.sns.it/person/donatella-della-porta/
46 Reclaiming Participatory Governance: Social Movements and the Reinvention of Democratic Innovation
47 Report of the 2021 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis
48 https://leadersforglobalassemblies.earth/the-letter/
As explained by Claire Mellier and Rich Wilson in an article for Carnegie Europe\textsuperscript{49}, “global governance is not like local or national governance: there is no one in charge”. In this contested land, “the Global Assembly was a hastily erected tent that every citizen on earth was invited to enter”. Initiated from within civil society in this way, the assembly was docked into formal UN COP governance arrangements with the guidance of representatives from the UN Secretariat, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UK and Scottish governments as the hosts of COP26, and the COP Champions Network.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres endorsed the initiative\textsuperscript{50}, saying, “The Global Citizens' Assembly for COP26 is a practical way of showing how we can accelerate action through solidarity and people power. You are helping to send the message loud and clear: people everywhere want bold, ambitious climate action, and now is the moment for national leaders to stand and deliver.” This endorsement came alongside those of others, such as COP26 President Alok Sharma\textsuperscript{51}, COP26 High-Level Champion for Climate Action Nigel Topping\textsuperscript{52}, First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon, climate justice activist Vanessa Nakate, and a host of others who supported the attempt to create a citizen-led governance chamber connected to institutions, civil society, and grassroots communities.

This institutional impact of the Global Assembly is assessed in detail in the forthcoming evaluation report\textsuperscript{53}.

3. What next for citizens’ assemblies and systemic transformation?

Can climate CAs, as they are currently designed, really challenge the very regime by which they have been instituted? Can they install a new political object that is capable of critiquing the dominant framing of the problem of climate change, and able to question the prevailing growth-based and capitalist economic and social model?

If citizens’ assemblies are intended to open possibilities for systemic transformations, the insights and examples above show that there is a need to learn from past experiences where this has either been able to take place to some degree, or where this has not been possible. In the next section, a number of general recommendations for citizens’ assembly design are highlighted, followed by specific recommendations for policy makers and other civil society actors. The briefing concludes with a strategic common goal that we propose deliberative democracy practitioners consider in relation to enabling and navigating systemic transformations in relation to the polycrisis.

\textsuperscript{49} A Global Citizens’ Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis - Carnegie Europe
\textsuperscript{50} Join the world’s first Global Citizens’ Assembly for COP26 | UNA_UK
\textsuperscript{51} Alok Sharma Global Citizens Assembly Launch
\textsuperscript{52} ‘Global Citizens’ Assembly’ to seek climate change solutions ahead of U.N. talks | Reuters “The Global Citizens’ Assembly for COP26 will be the biggest ever process of its kind -- building new relationships between people across the world, but also between citizens and leaders,” Nigel Topping.
\textsuperscript{53} See footnote 35
The recommendations the authors put forward require more testing and scrutiny, and there also remain some obstacles and unresolved questions as to how to address systemic transformations in the context of the polycrisis. As part of this, it is important for both researchers and practitioners of citizens’ assemblies to collaborate and be open to experimentation as much as possible, and give ourselves licence to fail and learn from mistakes.

The authors offer these recommendations with the caveat that deliberative democracy’s potential to navigate complex trade-offs amid polycrisis cannot be realised simply through citizens’ assemblies alone. For citizens’ assemblies to improve the way in which the polycrisis is addressed, design must at a minimum consider how the assembly’s process and recommendations integrate with the pre-existing political context, including political institutions, public debate, and civil society54. Even then, without upgrading surrounding democratic structures too, even the most transformative assemblies will struggle to meaningfully impact society.

A great many more societal interventions that build deliberative capacity outside of CAs are needed, in a range of settings. For example, deliberative systems theorists55 suggest understanding deliberation as a communicative activity that occurs in a diversity of spaces, and emphasises the need for interconnection between these spaces56, ranging from social movements, the media, educational settings etc. In practice, each space will be imperfect and vulnerable to co-option, distortion or marginalisation on its own. But as the routes to deliberative democracy increase in prevalence, they have the potential to collectively build the critical thinking, systems thinking, and citizenship skills required to orient societal progress amid uncertainty, increasing environmental change, and vested interests.

### 3.1. General recommendations

#### 3.1.1 Design processes with a systems change’s lens from the outset

A current concern is that deliberative democratic theory, as well as practical interventions like mini-publics, tend to address parts of the system, or isolated dynamics, without a sufficient grasp of the broader whole. Systems thinkers and traditional and indigenous wisdom keepers urge that we approach complex problems in ecosystemic rather than linear, mechanistic terms. The authors recommend that a system change framework is used from the outset when designing deliberative processes that aim at addressing the root causes of the polycrisis. Many resources are available online57.

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54 [Integrating citizen deliberation into climate governance: Lessons on robust design from six climate assemblies - Boswell](https://involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/what/deliberative-systems-thinking)
55 [PDF] Beyond Deliberative Systems: Pluralizing the Debate
56 [School of System Change Faculty for a Future](https://involve.org.uk/resources/knowledge-base/what/deliberative-systems-thinking)
Tools of systems and design thinking, combined as ‘systemic design’, offer a way for mini-publics to be crafted and run so that they are more attentive to systemic dynamics. Systemic design has a large toolkit of methods. The authors recommend including the following elements as part of a system change deliberative process:

- an introduction to critical and system thinking as part of a learning phase of a deliberative mini-public,
- a session that articulates the political economy of climate change, and looks at alternative economic models,
- an introduction to the polycrisis that acknowledges different world views, and considerations from a global south perspective,
- the use of the “power cube” or other power analysis tools to explore power dynamics in society

Deliberative democratic forums like mini-publics are an important part of generating just, effective, sustainable climate solutions, but only when deliberative democrats address the complexity of social, economic, cultural, and ecological systems. Then the responses developed will be sufficiently bold, and tested against the emergent dynamics of the problems we seek to address.

3.1.2 Focus on controversies rather than consensus building

Climate CAs typically seek consensus on policy recommendations in a forum that is expected to be representative of the wider population. But political disagreement is inevitable in society, especially on issues that involve complex trade-offs, and can alternatively be seen as an important forum in which alternative futures can be articulated and negotiated.

Likewise, broad acceptance of the framing and evidence presented to assembly members has hitherto been seen as crucial for the resulting recommendations to be seen as legitimate, and therefore politically powerful. However, given the polarised and often fraught debate surrounding the topic of socioecological transformation, bringing these disagreements into assembly processes is crucial to plan a shared path forward. Doing so also helps to broaden awareness of obstacles to action on socio ecological issues.

CAs should therefore be designed to detect, communicate, and explore (rather than ignore) the main points of disagreement over systemic social and environmental issues and potential futures.

This could be achieved by acknowledging that there is no neutrality in any process, and that this framing is actually damaging to the credibility of deliberative approaches. Instead, the authors suggest the use of the concept of integrity, which acknowledges that there are embedded values

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58 Thinking systemically about deliberative democracy and climate change Summary Introduction
in any process. The Deliberative Integrity project\textsuperscript{60} provides a range of resources on the topic, which are invaluable to practitioners and academics alike. In Table 3, the authors explore the handling of controversies in the Convention Citoyenne Climat (CCC).

After choosing assembly members by sortition, the second task of the CCC’s Governance Committee was to organise the work of the Convention to meet its mandate. The committee recognised the double risk that:

A. the CCC’s scope could easily become limited and technocratic in light of the background learning materials being mainly produced by a government ministry, and a framing question oriented around the government’s 2030 emissions reduction target

B. it may be difficult for assembly members to identify blockages to public action on climate without further support.

To navigate these risks, the Governance Committee began to work on identifying the barriers and levers of change for climate action in each of the five areas defined for the work of the Convention (Consuming, Producing and Working, Moving, Housing and Food). Later, it also began drafting "controversy sheets" as background material for assembly members.

However, the decision to do this work only came partway into the process after issues raised by some committee members. As a result, it was decided that there was insufficient time to complete it for use in the CCC process.

Had the organising committee been grounded in a culture of controversies from the start, rather than attempting to transition from the culture of consensus and compromise that most of the materials and process were based on, assembly members may have had a better capacity to prioritise the issues on which to work and to choose the experts to be heard in a contradictory debate. This lack of adversarial debate and dialogue has been one of the criticisms often levelled at the Convention.

Table 3: Case study: Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat’s (CCC) handling of controversies \textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{60} https://deliberativeintegrityproject.org/
\textsuperscript{61} Gouverner une assemblée citoyenne. Le rôle du Comité de gouvernance de la Convention citoyenne pour le climat | Cairn.info Jean-Michel Fourniau - Participations 2022/3 (N° 34), pages 139 à 171
3.1.3 Allow citizens more freedom to set the agenda and shape the process

Two newly formed permanent climate citizens’ assemblies in Brussels\textsuperscript{62} and Milan\textsuperscript{63} have agenda setting power. However, evaluations of these processes are not yet available\textsuperscript{64}.

For most climate CAs so far, their agenda and process have typically been predetermined as per the CAUK example given above - framed around “how” a policy strategy should be reached, not “if” it is appropriate and what other aims and approaches should be used\textsuperscript{65}.

France’s CCC was shaped by the citizens more than any other climate citizens' assembly, asking how France can “reach \textbf{at least} 40\% reduction of GHG emissions by 2030 in the spirit of social justice”. But the process still did not allow assembly members to talk about critical elements of the political economy such as GDP and alternative models of development.

Social psychology literature on ‘scaffolding’\textsuperscript{66} shows how the right support is critical for people to fully understand a situation and confidently respond to it. In the case of climate assemblies, we are currently seeing incremental proposals arise out of a situation that has already been defined as an ‘emergency’. As such, we suggest there needs to be a greater willingness to create conditions that support ambition.

The authors encourage bold experimentation to allow citizens more agency in shaping the agenda of CAs, starting first with presenting fundamental building blocks necessary to understand systemic transformations. This means not only scaffolding critical thinking skills, as used in many processes such as North of Tyne Climate CA\textsuperscript{67} and Climate Assembly UK\textsuperscript{68}, but also an introduction to how multiple social, natural, and technological systems relate to each other, and the dynamics of power and societal change. Given the uncertainties in how these crises will unfold, we also believe that assembly members should have access to the full range of forecasts of consequences for people’s lives.

In the spirit of experimentation, the authors would like to see commissioning bodies design citizens’ assemblies with two clear stages. A first stage would lay the necessary groundwork for assembly members to make a broad assessment of what should be on the agenda to address environmental and related social crises, and therefore what expertise is required. In this stage,

\textsuperscript{63} https://www.comune.milano.it/web/milano-cambia-aria/come-posso-partecipare/sono-un-cittadino/assemblea-permanente-dei-cittadini-sul-clima
\textsuperscript{64} Brussels inaugurates its first Citizens’ Climate Assembly - Missions Publques
\textsuperscript{65} See section “aim” Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat: What can we learn from the French Citizens’ Assembly on climate change? | involve.org.uk
\textsuperscript{66} What is good help?
\textsuperscript{67} Dr Stephen Elstub - North of Tyne Citizens’ Assembly Session 1 (24th February): Critical Thinking
\textsuperscript{68} Dr Alan Renwick, the Constitution Unit at University College London: considering evidence - Climate Assembly UK
key controversies and uncertainties can be deliberated on. A second stage can then facilitate assembly members to discuss this agenda, and make decisions.

3.1.4 Facilitate emotional engagement with crises

Traditional perspectives on deliberative democracy argue that mini-publics should involve the exchange of rational arguments\(^{69}\), with emotional engagement to be avoided. Recent research developments\(^{70}\) are demonstrating that other forms of communication, such as non verbal expressions need to be taken into account.

The potential suffering associated with the impacts of environmental crises is immense, as is the likely scale of change to daily life required to avoid the worst impacts. Emotional engagement with and support to healthily process these potentially traumatic realities is therefore crucial. This is not group therapy, but rather a precondition to avoid typical responses such as downplaying the scale and urgency of crises (flight) or becoming part of a highly polarised debate (fight).

By fostering governing sentiments that allows people to share and discuss their hopes and fears, rather than just their policy opinions, values or beliefs, assembly members can be supported to appreciate varying points of view on otherwise polarising topics, agree on a recommendation for society, and defuse polarisation in wider society in post-assembly media.

Scotland’s Climate Assembly attempted to foster this kind of communication by supporting emotional engagement on climate change\(^{71}\). The Assembly organisers incorporated a systemic approach into the design and framing, by developing four scenarios of the future depicting different routes that could be taken to achieve net zero and showing how change can happen at different levels and paces. The scenarios represented a range of worldviews and assumptions including. A fictional story for each of these scenarios was created, illustrating what a day in the life of an ordinary Scottish citizen might look like at some point in the future up to 2040. The scenarios were: Techno optimism, Climate mobilisation, Community collaboration, and Civic provision and regulation. According to the evaluation\(^{72}\), there were differences in views expressed by the Assembly Members about the extent to which the Assembly dealt effectively with the systemic nature of climate change, and how members were supported in grasping the vast interconnectedness of it all. Analysis of the Assembly report finds that only half the recommendations involve, or could involve (depending on how the recommendation is implemented including the scale and speed of change) transformational change, with the remainder involving incremental change.

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69 Communicative rationality - Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy
70 More than Words: A Multidimensional Approach to Deliberative Democracy - Ricardo Fabrino Mendonça, Selen A Erçan, Hans Asenbaum, 2022
71 The Emotional Experience of Members of Scotland's Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change
72 Scotland's Climate Assembly - process, impact and assembly member experience: research report - gov.scot
The Global Assembly also aimed at supporting a deeper level of emotional engagement during the deliberations, both in the core assembly and community assemblies\textsuperscript{73}. The emphasis in the pilot Community Assemblies was on sharing stories, experiences and feelings. This focus was presented in the Toolkit\textsuperscript{74} as Activity 02: Expressing Hopes and Fears. A number of Community Assemblies engaged in this activity, sometimes deepening it with their own additions and interpretations of the activity. However, more research and evaluation is needed to assess the impact of these techniques on the participants and their responses to the crisis.

Recent research\textsuperscript{75} shows that unrealistic optimism and wishful thinking are forms of defence against facing difficult truths, and are considered maladaptive if maintained over the longer term because they serve to absolve the person from having to take radical action.

Designers of deliberative processes looking to foster communication at a deeper level, with the aim of exploring governing sentiments (e.g. hopes and fears) rather than just values and beliefs, could take inspiration from approaches such as Theory U\textsuperscript{76} and Pocket Project\textsuperscript{77} as examples of healthy emotional processing supporting healthy democracy.

3.1.5 Invest substantial effort into engaging the broader public

It is particularly crucial that the wider public is as involved as possible in any citizens’ assembly with ambitions to allow systemic discussion of climate and related crises, as it is likely that difficult decisions involving trade-offs will need to be made. This can be achieved in two main ways, the first of which being public media engagement.

In our view, any citizens’ assembly must be accompanied by substantial resources to engage the broader public. This is a crucial first step for whatever decisions to be seen by the public as legitimate, and therefore harder for decision-makers to ignore. Without strong public awareness, decision-makers are under little pressure to implement any assembly’s recommendations.

As an absolute minimum, assemblies need to develop robust communication strategies informed by clear theories of change able to reach multiple demographics.

It is also important that assembly members themselves are at the forefront of as much media as possible. Based on the authors’ experiences from the CCC, CAUK, and GA, it is the unfiltered sharing of their experiences directly with the public that most effectively generates connection with and support for assemblies. The Global Assembly for instance produced eight films\textsuperscript{78} on the lives of eight of the assembly members and their experiences of the Global Assembly, but as

\textsuperscript{73} Report of the 2021 Global Assembly on the Climate and Ecological Crisis page 195
\textsuperscript{74} https://globalassembly.org/resources/brand-imagery/GA_DIY-Toolkit_v5.1.pdf
\textsuperscript{75} Andrews & Hoggett 2019 Facing up to ecological crisis - a psychosocial perspective from climate psychology
\textsuperscript{76} Theory U
\textsuperscript{77} Collective Trauma & Democracy-EN – The Pocket Project
\textsuperscript{78} https://twitter.com/_GlobalAssembly/status/155116490895385857
described in more detail in table 4 below, the communication of those stories presented various challenges.

| Table 4: Case study of the Global Assembly: Finding the stories that resonate |

Communicating the stories before the process has happened is challenging\(^7\). To keep the Core Assembly Members as free as possible from external influence, their identities were not published until they presented their Declaration at COP26. This created a challenge for the Communications team: until Assembly Members were able to tell their stories, and communicate the impact of the Global Assembly on them personally, there was limited content with which to inspire participation and interest.

More creativity is needed to engage people outside of the deliberative community. In 2021, engagement came mainly from those already working in the deliberative field. This is understandable, given that sufficient budget was not available to invest in a broad public engagement campaign. Furthermore, the main ‘call to action’ for the public was to run Community Assemblies, an activity that may not have been easily approachable for those unfamiliar with deliberative or community dialogues.

In the future, there is an important role for communicators to play in bringing to life the often academic language around deliberative democracy. Anecdotally, the narrative strand that has resonated most with non-specialist audiences is that the climate and ecological crisis (and indeed many other crises) is a symptom of a governance crisis, and that there is a better way of finding solutions which centres citizens. This narrative is a shift away from the often-heard stories from the front line of climate change, which focus on practical ways communities can act (such as tree-planting schemes), and the need for existing power-holders to listen to citizens.

Instead, it communicates the bigger-picture need to reboot the entire system and put citizens at the heart of decision-making. Since the Global Assembly 2021 took place, this idea has grown, with the IPCC being more explicit about the role for citizens in governance around climate\(^8\). Hopefully, this can be explored more fully through future citizens’ assemblies, generating powerful content from participants that would inspire more citizens to realise their self and collective efficacy in driving change.


\(^{8}\) See IPCC WGII Sixth Assessment Report, page 30, section SPM.C.5.6: “Inclusive governance that prioritises equity and justice in adaptation planning and implementation leads to more effective and sustainable adaptation outcomes (high confidence). Vulnerabilities and climate risks are often reduced through carefully designed and implemented laws, policies, processes, and interventions that address context specific inequities such as based on gender, ethnicity, disability, age, location and income (high confidence). These approaches, which include multi-stakeholder co-learning platforms, transboundary collaborations, community-based adaptation and participatory scenario planning, focus on capacity building, and meaningful participation of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, and their access to key resources to adapt (high confidence).”
3.1.6 Combine deep deliberation & wide participation in order to engage more people

Ideally, in addition to media engagement in which the public plays a more passive role, climate assemblies should also offer ways for the wider public to participate in parallel deliberative processes. In this way, climate assemblies can serve as the focal point of a broader societal conversation starter to push beyond discursive and political deadlocks.

Scotland’s Climate Assembly, for example, promoted parallel deliberations in the country’s Children’s Parliament and schools. The Global Assembly took this a step further through inviting civil society to participate in ‘community assemblies’ that take place in schools, community groups and other organisations.

At the heart of the challenge for scaling up deliberation is the trade off between quality and quantity. The strict standards to ensure high-quality and legitimate formal deliberation are cost-prohibitive to implement in wider participation processes, and also make them far less accessible to people with limited free time. This does however limit the degree to which parallel deliberation processes can contribute to the central assembly’s outputs. This posed problems for the GA, as the main criticism of processes was that people didn’t feel that their participation would lead to anything.

Based on these learnings, we suggest that practitioners have two functions in mind when creating wider deliberation processes. First, they should allow time for discussion of the wider systemic issues at play that the central assembly is considering. In so doing, they will have greater appreciation of the challenge the assembly members are facing, and greater respect for the eventual recommendations. Second, they should also allow time for deliberation on whichever systemic issues can be influenced at a local level, and create space to arrive at recommendations that can be input into the local political context.

Particularly ambitious assembly processes may attempt to collate distributed deliberations for consideration by a central assembly, but we appreciate that this may be beyond the reach of most practitioners.

3.1.7 Embed reflective evaluation that supports iterative and ongoing joint learning

Typically researchers evaluate citizens’ assemblies after they have been completed. There is also usually no framework in place for a continuous feedback loop between designers, evaluators, and assembly members.

We encourage process designers and researchers to engage in more self-reflective practice that places integrity, rather than neutrality, at the heart of their work. Especially in context of

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81 Are citizen juries and assemblies on climate change driving democratic climate policymaking? An exploration of two case studies in the UK, Rebecca Wells, Candice Howarth, Lina I Brand-Correa
82 https://deliberativeintegrityproject.org/about/
the need to experiment boldly given the urgency of the planetary predicament, we think that all involved in assembly processes would benefit from embracing more of an action learning models of evaluation, as was developed by the Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS)\textsuperscript{83} in Germany. For example, researchers provided expert advice and sat on the advisory board for the civil society-initiated, national Citizens’ Climate Assembly. RIFS was also involved in the Berlin Citizens’ Climate Assembly, helping to develop realistic everyday scenarios in advance, which formed the basis for the Assembly’s recommendations for climate policy in Berlin. The work of RIFS in monitoring and supporting citizens’ participatory processes, its work in policy advice, and its disciplinary scientific research generate new insights for democratic theory and practice through joint learning and reflection.

3.1.8 Go beyond inclusion

The use of random selection and facilitated deliberation is assumed to generate high levels of equity and inclusion. Certainly, the participants in climate assemblies (and other deliberative mini-publics) are more diverse than most other political institutions. However, there are limits to this approach\textsuperscript{84}. A KNOCA seminar on inclusion and disadvantage in climate citizens’ assemblies\textsuperscript{85} explored the following two questions: Do elements of climate assembly practice lead to disadvantages for particular social groups? Do we need to look more closely at the design and practice of climate assemblies through the lens of equity and inclusion?

The authors believe that climate citizens’ assemblies need to redress power imbalances towards disadvantaged groups. This is something John Boswell, in his paper “Seeing like a citizen”\textsuperscript{86} describes in great depth by highlighting the discrepancies between formal and informal inclusion, and the implications for deliberative practice. In particular, this insight calls attention to the need not to treat everyone equally if we want them to participate equally.

Other academics have challenged the assumption that a climate CA is fully representative. As described by Amanda Machin\textsuperscript{87}, “the fact that it is to some extent descriptively representative (it “mirrors” the population in its composition of individuals in terms of features such as gender, ethnicity, and age) does not mean it is necessarily substantively representative (reflecting the various substantive interests of the population)”. She proceeds by highlighting that “organisers of a CA cannot know for sure whether all political positions on climate have been included”.

Moreover, the decision about which particular descriptive features are to be mirrored is not clear. There are individuals whose opinions and experiences might be highly pertinent but whose voices are not included such as children, future generations, distant others, nonhuman

\textsuperscript{83} https://www.rifs-potsdam.de/en/output/dossiers/mini-publics
\textsuperscript{84} To realise deliberative democracy’s promise, we need to go beyond inclusion
\textsuperscript{85} Workshop on Inclusion and Disadvantage in Climate Assemblies - KNOCA
\textsuperscript{86} Boswell I Seeing Like a Citizen: How Being a Participant in a Citizens’ Assembly Changed Everything I Thought I Knew about Deliberative Minipublics
\textsuperscript{87} Democracy, Agony, and Rupture: A Critique of Climate Citizens’ Assemblies - PMC
nature, although several citizens assemblies have recently included specific deliberative processes for children, such as in the Scottish Climate Assembly and the recent Irish Children and Young People’s Assembly on Biodiversity Loss.

### 3.2. Top down Citizens’ Assemblies commissioned by power-holders

Top down Citizens’ Assemblies committed to opening space for system change, need to embed a recognition of politics, power and a willingness to let go of control.

Research about members of the UK parliament suggests that most politicians are conscious of the need for transformative action on the climate crisis, but feel that their ability to address it is limited by party politics and short-term election cycles. The consistent decline in trust of traditional politics clearly indicates that the public also recognise the limits of present decision-making processes to deal with this century’s complex, interconnected, and globalised issues.

The authors encourage policy-makers to be open about these political quandaries, and explicitly advocate for citizens’ assemblies as a way to make progress on issues that traditional politics has been ducking for a long time, but will inevitably have to be faced. In so doing, they can simultaneously break discursive deadlocks, and start to restore trust.

If such commitments are made, resulting citizens’ assemblies need to be accompanied with stronger measures to counter the post-assembly ‘filter’ of governments than previously seen. Some people advocate for binding recommendations or connections with referendums.

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88 Full article: Looking to the future? Including children, young people and future generations in deliberations on climate action: Ireland’s Citizens’Assembly 2016–2018
89 Climate change for the Climate Assembly - Children's Parliament
90 Children and Young People’s Assembly on Biodiversity Loss
91 Bristol University Press | Too Hot to Handle? - The Democratic Challenge of Climate Change, By Rebecca Willis
92 Global Public Opinion in an Era of Democratic Anxiety | Pew Research Center
93 Integrating citizen deliberation into climate governance: Lessons on robust design from six climate assemblies - Boswell - 2023 - Public Administration - Wiley Online Library
95 Citizens’ Assemblies for Referendums and Constitutional Reforms: Is There an "Irish Model" for Deliberative Democracy?
3.3. **Bottom up Citizens’ Assemblies outside of the policy process: redirecting power**

3.3.1 Reclaiming participatory governance

It is often assumed that a citizens’ assembly with a strong mandate from a public institution, with clear rules around implementation of the assembly's recommendations, will lead to change. However, the authors’ experiences of the CCC and the CAUK in particular suggest that this is an overly simplistic theory of societal change. Indeed, the technocratic-managerial approach in these assemblies can just as easily be argued to have undermined or obstructed systemic transformation.96

Although citizens' assemblies that are purposefully set up outside of the policymaking process lack the connections to visible power to directly influence decision-making, they have enormous potential to open up more discussion of systemic changes in popular political agendas. By bringing together diverse social movements and citizen groups to deliberate on a shared goal, new ideas can be generated, and collective action can be taken towards making them reality.97

Such assemblies can also help people envision and support new governance models, which can in turn force undemocratic decision-making processes to change or become irrelevant. Dissatisfaction with the fundamental political decision-making process is now rife in many countries, but awareness of alternatives such as deliberative democracy remains low.

Democratic innovations (i.e. participatory or deliberative processes) have been hailed as an antidote to the elected representatives’ plummeting legitimacy. However, Sonia Bussu et al.98 argue that these often top down invited spaces are giving too much power to the commissioning bodies, who design the process and choose who to invite, and that these “sanitised” processes of participation end up depoliticizing citizen engagement. They also argue that “bottom up” forms of collaboration and social innovation led by social movements and grassroots politics attempt to institutionalise more prefigurative politics with an emphasis on social justice and the political economy.

In recent months, the authors have indeed noticed the rise of advocacy from different movements reclaiming the space of democratic innovations. These include the initiative “Earth for All”99 calling for deliberative processes on economic system change. In 2021, Earth4All and partners published a major survey100 of the 20 largest economies that showed that three in four people (74%) across the G20 support reform of economic systems away from a singular focus on profit and growth towards a focus more on human wellbeing and the planet. This survey

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96 Marit Hammond [Full article: Democratic deliberation for sustainability transformations: between constructiveness and disruption](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10670569.2017.1318859)
98 [Reclaiming Participatory Governance: Social Movements and the Reinvention of Democratic Innovation](https://www.iai.it/en/research/series/44)
99 [Power to the people: Stockholm+50 should support citizens assemblies - Earth4All](https://www.earth4all.se/press-release/power-to-the-people-stockholm50-should-support-citizens-assemblies)
100 [74% of people in G20 want economic transformation - Earth4All](https://www.earth4all.se/press-release/74-of-people-in-g20-want-economic-transformation)
indicates that the political window may be opening up for conversations about post-growth or wellbeing economies. This is echoed by the recent call for citizens' engagement on degrowth at the Beyond Growth Conference\textsuperscript{101} which took place in Brussels in May 2023.

3.3.2 Explore the potential for Citizens’ Assemblies to build collective efficacy

In light of the difficulty policy-making processes have had systemically addressing environmental and social crises, the authors are particularly keen to emphasise the potential for citizens’ assemblies to instead build the self-efficacy and collective efficacy of people to make change themselves.

If supported by non-state actors with sufficient resources, such citizens' assemblies could go beyond making recommendations to supporting people to enact the result of deliberations while bypassing the ‘filter’ of governments entirely, in line with the principle highlighted by Buckminster Fuller\textsuperscript{102}, architect, systems theorist, writer, designer, inventor, philosopher, and futurist: “You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete”.

This kind of model could, for example, be applied to discussing what transformative changes can be made in local contexts without government approval, or to enacting transformative changes in particular sectors of the economy.

This is particularly well illustrated by the newly formed Convention of the Future Armenian (CFA)\textsuperscript{103}, a civil society led deliberative initiative involving a large affiliation network of organisations in Armenia and diaspora. The establishment of this affiliation network is put in place in order to facilitate the implementation of the CFA’s proposals, which might involve direct funding of the proposals, or taking them forward themselves if they are within a network member’s area of responsibility or capability.

3.4. A common strategic goal: Permanent citizens’ chambers as preparation for system change ‘moments’

The vast majority of citizens’ assemblies to date have been one-off processes, often in response to particular events that have brought to the political foreground long-running issues. While these have had some impact on policy, the authors believe that more permanent deliberative architecture is needed for citizens’ assemblies to truly navigate the systemic transformations required by the polycrisis.

This is because systemic transformations nearly always happen in a non-continuous fashion. Typically, social systems change little for long periods, until particular events highlight their vulnerability and inadequacy to provide a safe, fair and sustainable society. If the right

\textsuperscript{101} Beyond Growth 2023 Conference Pathways towards Sustainable Prosperity in the EU
\textsuperscript{102} About Fuller – Buckminster Fuller Institute
\textsuperscript{103} Convention of the Future Armenian • The Future Armenian
conditions are in place at the time of an event, much larger changes are much more likely to be made.

One-off or reactive citizens’ assembles operate on far too slow a timescale to catalyse action from these system change ‘moments’, not least because human attention is transient, and because power holders with interests in maintaining the present system are able to reconsolidate power through media and political influence far quicker.

The Covid-19 pandemic\textsuperscript{104} is a perfect example of this. Lacking alternative political infrastructure to catalyse learnings into action, revealed systemic vulnerabilities - such as a just-in-time economy that prioritises efficiency over well-being - have not been addressed. This is despite popular polling in several countries\textsuperscript{105}, including the UK\textsuperscript{106}, indicating that a majority of people wanted the economy to prioritise well-being over profit.

Regardless of the level of political action forthcoming, the coming years are likely to bring a number of these system change ‘moments’ in the face of climate and ecological breakdown\textsuperscript{107}. For instance, as explained by Olivia Lazard\textsuperscript{108}, fellow at Carnegie Europe, expert in the geopolitics of climate, Europe is experiencing the results of growing water scarcity, and droughts are becoming geological. In a country like France, this is no longer just limited to trade passages as a result of rivers drying up or shrinking agricultural outputs. It is also causing increased political polarisation and civic violence\textsuperscript{109}. In response to the droughts, the French government decided to build water catchment infrastructures specifically designed to bring additional support to agricultural producers. But the water catchment structures, called “bassines,” have become the physical embodiments of divisions between those who favour risk mitigation strategies in the face of climate change, aiming to continue agricultural business as usual; and those who favour systems change, supporting more environmentally friendly and localised agriculture. This highly polarised situation is the illustration of the mismanagement of the commons\textsuperscript{110}, that is likely to become more generalised as the polycrisis unfolds\textsuperscript{111}.

Each of these system change moments will provoke deeper reflection on the social systems that have increased their likelihood, frequency, and severity. We believe permanent citizens’ chambers are needed, so that societies can embrace deliberation, and catalyse its transformative potential into courageous adaptation action, as the challenges emerge\textsuperscript{112}. In that regard, rich countries from the Global North that have been spared from the most intense impacts of the climate and ecological crisis so far, need to learn from countries on the front line.

\textsuperscript{104} Democracy in a Pandemic: Participation in response to crisis | involve.org.uk
\textsuperscript{105} world dealing with lockdown? This poll has captured the public’s mood
\textsuperscript{106} New polling: only 12% want UK to prioritise economic growth over wellbeing - Positive Money
\textsuperscript{107} GAR2022: Our World at Risk (GAR) | UNDRR
\textsuperscript{108} The EU's Water Strategy Is Too Shallow - Carnegie Europe
\textsuperscript{109} Bassines. La violence des affrontements à Sainte-Soline a brouillé le message sur les enjeux de l’eau
\textsuperscript{110} Elinor Ostrom’s 8 rules for managing the commons – The Earthbound Report
\textsuperscript{111} This is a crisis: Facing up to the age of environmental breakdown | IPPR
\textsuperscript{112} Deliberative democracy in the age of serial crisis - Nicole Curato, Jensen Sass, Selen A Ercan, Simon Niemeyer, 2022
in the Global South, where communities that are struck by disasters have learned to navigate their situation to obtain the resources for survival and reconstruction and find a voice in a confusing political landscape.\(^{113}\)

The systemic challenges brought by the polycrisis require ambitious and profound governance reform. Permanent assemblies are just one element of the governance system that needs creating, alongside more deliberative capacity-building across society. Awareness of deliberative democracy is still low in most countries around the world, and one of the most important first steps is to raise consciousness that alternative models of decision-making that place more hands in the power of ordinary people exist. The authors believe that at a time of rising mistrust, populism, and polarisation, such cultural awareness raising work is particularly timely.

With such efforts, popular desire for citizen participation to be a more constant part of society will build. The authors encourage actors from across civil society who are interested in or are already advocating for deliberative democracy to consider collaborating strategically on how to work towards permanent chambers.

It is crucial that this is done as a part of wide-ranging reform of democratic systems. Narrow focus could result in providing legitimacy for democratic systems that need fundamental reform. The move towards institutionalisation of permanent citizens’ assemblies is a case in point: should we institutionalise creative inclusive deliberative systems or narrowly defined adjuncts to existing governance chambers?

The authors encourage challenges to their thinking, as they recognise the speculative nature of some of their assertions.

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\(^{113}\) [Democracy in a Time of Misery: From Spectacular Tragedies to Deliberative Action | Oxford Academic](https://www.oxfordacademic.edu)