

TOWARDS PERMANENT CITIZENS' CLIMATE ASSEMBLIES

A FIDE/KNOCA discussion note – comments welcome

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A wave of citizens' assemblies on the climate at local, regional, national and even transnational level is sweeping across Europe and beyond. They carry the promise of finding better approaches to solving the climate and ecological crisis, while promoting a more inclusive and democratic way of doing politics. However, some doubt that the ad-hoc use of climate citizens' assemblies is sufficient to contribute effectively to both the climate and ecological crisis and the democratic crisis in the long run. For this reason, a growing number of practitioners, activists and researchers are advocating for permanent or institutionalized climate citizens' assemblies.

Terminology. In this Note and the KNOCA/FIDE Workshop, we have chosen to use the term “permanent”. It is common for the terms “institutionalized” or “institutionalization” to be used. We have decided not to use these latter terms, as many find them confusing, and they do not necessarily indicate permanency. For example, it is reasonable to say that Ireland has institutionalized citizens' assemblies, but they are not a required part of the Irish political system – each assembly must be established by parliament on an individual (ad-hoc) basis. Similarly, a permanent assembly is not necessarily “embedded”. A permanent assembly can be ignored and have little effect on climate governance. We are open to other terms!

In this Note, we summarise the different arguments that are made in favour and against permanent assemblies. We then provide a brief sketch of three permanent assemblies that have been established recently: the Brussels and Milan climate citizens' assemblies and the more generic citizens' assembly established in Paris. Each is codified in a different way.

The promise of permanent assemblies

Reducing arbitrariness in timing. A permanent assembly can prevent arbitrariness as to when, how and on what topic assemblies are convened. Most authorities have commissioned one-off assemblies, often expecting them to produce recommendations across the range of climate issues. But many have been negatively affected by changing political circumstances and many of their recommendations have landed at a point when the policy cycle is not receptive.

Tackling the long-term. The climate and ecological crisis is in constant evolution and cannot be solved once and for all. Mitigation and adaptation strategies require constant policy adjustments, and new and increasingly complex challenges are constantly emerging. Permanent assemblies can be responsive to changes in conditions, knowledge, technology, and political and social attitudes. Previous recommendations can be revisited and revised by permanent assemblies to ensure they meet changing circumstances.

Better integration of deliberation into climate governance. Public authorities find it hard to integrate assemblies into their policy work as it is an unusual type of input – they are more used to expert advice, opinion polls and focus groups and civil society representation. A more constructive relationship between assemblies and public administration can emerge over time as officials become more familiar with the value of their inputs. Culture change and the embedding of assemblies takes time.

Improving oversight and monitoring. It is challenging for ad-hoc assemblies to monitor the response of public authorities and stakeholders to their recommendations and to ensure that cherry-picking of recommendations does not take place. Permanent assemblies can more easily provide oversight, monitoring what has happened to previous recommendations and reviewing the response of authorities and stakeholders.

Cost-reduction. Permanent infrastructure is less resource intensive than organising multiple one-off processes, as they do not need to be reinvented from the ground up every time.

Enhancing transformative effects of participation. A more systematic and continuous use of assemblies means more citizens participate. Given the significant impact of assemblies on attitudes and behaviours of members, permanency broadens the transformative impact of participation and consequent knock-on effects to society.

Creating a learning environment. Ad-hoc assemblies always can be improved. But that learning is rarely utilised by the organisers. Permanent bodies enable learning on how to better organise climate deliberation, enhancing creativity and innovation.

Improve public legitimacy. The stability and predictability that comes with permanent citizens' assemblies can enhance public trust and legitimacy of climate governance. More robust climate policy is often blocked by established economic, social and political lobbies that have an interest in current ecologically unsustainable patterns of activity. More permanent participation infrastructure can provide a counterpower to these interests. Permanent assemblies can also help counter the perverse incentives of electoral cycles. The public is well aware of these dynamics that generate significant distrust in the political system.

Potential limitation of permanent assemblies

Co-option. Climate citizens' assemblies have been criticised for being too close to government sponsors who are unwilling to confront the systemic drivers of the climate and ecological crisis. The danger of permanent assemblies is that they will be even less independent of government and it will be a form of "citizenwashing" – an expensive example of engaging citizens to simply legitimise existing government policy.

Lack of sustained commitment. Electoral or structural changes in the administration, government and parliament can affect the durability of support for deliberative processes. For example, if assemblies are associated with particular political parties, changes in government after elections can lead to loss of interest in permanent bodies. One option is codification (legal standing), but even then examples exist of permanent participatory bodies that are simply ignored or sidelined. Codification alone does not ensure participation is embedded.

Resources. Setting up permanent assemblies can be a challenge in terms of resources: dedicated staffing to coordinate and other resources to support member engagement. It can also stretch the administration in responding to regular sets of recommendations.

Additional governance complexity. Permanence can generate more tasks than a "one-off" assembly, which can increase the complexity of governance of the institution (agenda-setting body, follow-up body, different deliberation groups, etc.).

Examples of permanent citizens' assemblies

In Europe, citizens' assemblies have been rendered more permanent in a few cities in recent years. In the following, the permanent climate assemblies in Brussels and Milan are introduced along with the permanent citizens' assemblies in Paris, which while broader in its scope has addressed environment and ecology and has a different structure from the other two cities.

Brussels Climate assembly

<https://www.assembleeclimat.brussels/lassemblee/>

In 2019, Brussels-Capital Region Government decided to convene a citizens' assembly for the climate. The Brussels Air, Climate and Energy Management Code that was already put in place stipulates in broad terms that citizen participation must be part of climate governance. In this code, the government added an article on the creation of the citizens' assembly, which made its convening possible. The government must still issue a ministerial decree specifying the conditions for setting up the assembly, i. e. deciding on the number of cycles per year or on the budget that it wishes to make available for the assembly. However, if a new government decides not to continue the project and to set up another form of participation, this is possible under the current law, as the legal framework is not yet complete. The assembly is not yet fully institutionalised.

The assembly was constituted in November 2022 and launched its first cycle from February to April 2023. Members of the assembly submitted their recommendations to the government in June 2023. The competent ministers of the Brussels-Capital Region Government provided initial feedback in September 2023 and will submit a detailed roadmap in April 2024.

The overarching goal is to make climate governance fairer by ensuring that Brussels' residents can actively participate in the transition to a carbon-neutral society by 2050. The broad issues that frame the assemblies work include "How do we want to live in 2050? How will we move around? How will we live? And, above all, what do we need in the short and medium term to achieve these goals?". In its first year, the assembly addressed the remit "How can we inhabit the city to meet the climate challenges of 2050?"

Random selection & Participation. The citizens' climate assembly is made up of 65 – 100 people chosen by lot. 10,000 randomly selected Brussels residents receive an invitation to take part in the assembly. Based on positive responses and socio-economic criteria (gender, age, place of residence, level of education, occupation, etc.), a second draw is held to select the members. This group is renewed every year, to ensure the assembly's long-term viability and the rotation of the citizens.

Agenda-Setting Competence. In the first cycle, three priorities were identified by participants to address the remit: housing differently, renovating in a spirit of social justice, greening for better living city. From the second cycle onwards, a quarter of the members of the previous assembly is drawn by lot to determine and formulate the next topic for the citizens' assembly. To facilitate this work, the

group engages with government and stakeholders (associations, experts, etc.). The second cycle will deal with food and nutrition.

Deliberation. The citizens meet on five weekends. Like a standard climate assembly, members combine learning, deliberation and recommendation-writing. Experts from government, academia, and civil society present the topic from different points of view, current challenges, and inspiring examples of action. These interventions are meant to be interactive and not purely lectures. Participants can also ask for other experts and sources of knowledge and if possible, they will be included in the next sessions. Members draft and validate a 2050 vision and make a series of recommendations that are delivered to the Government. For the first cycle, participants have submitted some sixty recommendations and nine ambitions.

Follow-up. At the final session of the assembly, the members submit their report to the assembly secretariat and to the Minister for the Environment. They are subsequently invited to a public event to present the report and the ideas and proposals it contains.

The administration will examine the feasibility of the proposals, and the competent Minister(s) will decide on the follow-up to be given to the recommendations and communicate them. The government will provide an initial response within three months and a second response within twelve months. A monitoring committee of 10 randomly selected members of the assembly oversees government action for one year and meets with ministers twice. Besides the two moments in which they meet the ministers, the citizens define their work and its intensity themselves. One idea from the citizens is to check whether the government is actually implementing a recommendation when it claims to be doing so by, for example, seeking out affected groups and asking them if the government is doing enough. They can also ask to meet someone from the administration or cabinet to get more information about government activities.

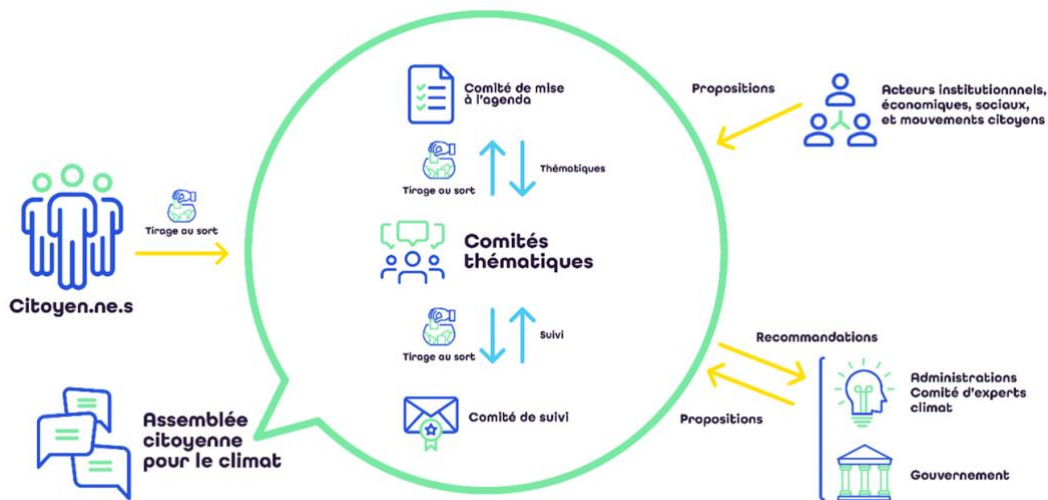
The government is committed to developing a roadmap for integrating the citizens' assembly's long-term vision and proposals into the region's climate governance. This close collaboration with the government and the administration is expected to increase the impact of the recommendations on regional climate policy.

Lessons learned from the first cycle. In order to support the agenda-setting process for the second cycle, the organization of the assembly requested input from a number of actors, including the government, parliament, communes, social players (*Brupartners*) and actors involved in environmental action (*Conseil d'environnement*). This input was presented to the citizens in the form of a report before they decided on the topic for the next assembly. For the next cycle, the organizers decided that it would be more interesting to turn the process around and first ask the citizens for their ideas and then ask the stakeholders for more specific guidance regarding these topics.

One of the main lessons of the first cycle is to start from the existing policies and their objectives, and then let the citizens deliberate on the broad directions of these policies. The first cycle focused more on members making their own recommendations, but in its first feedback, the government points out that many of these proposals are either already in the process of being implemented or at least already planned. To avoid this, members will be placed less in the position of being ad hoc policy makers and involved in the technical design of policy, and more in the development of overarching policies and priorities. The expectation is that this will strengthen the collaboration between decision-makers and citizens, as assembly members make visible social dimensions and aspects of policy that policymakers might otherwise not perceive.

Another lesson that is emerging (but still needs to be confirmed) is the broadness of the remit and the scope and number of the recommendations. To have a more concrete and efficient impact on climate governance may require more focused remits and a smaller number of recommendations.

Finally, the permanence of the process allows members from one cycle to transmit knowledge to citizens in the next cycle. This can, for example, also allow for a longer-term follow-up on both policy development and scrutiny of government action.



Source: <https://www.assembleeclimat.brussels/lassemblee/>

Milan Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate

<https://www.poliedra.polimi.it/en/project/permanent-citizens-assembly-climate/>

As part of the city's Air and Climate Plan, Milan's Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate is enshrined in the regulatory framework of the municipality. In 2023, the assembly was launched as a pilot.

The assembly's mandate is to supervise and support the implementation and evaluation of the Milan Air and Climate Plan until at least 2030. The plan sets out the city's strategy for reducing greenhouse gas emissions, improving air quality, and combating the effects of climate change by that date.

Random Selection & Participation. The permanent citizens' assembly on climate is composed of 90 randomly selected citizens who rotate after six consecutive months. Every 3 months, half of the assembly is renewed to allow new members to participate while maintaining the work of the assembly. Short training activities are proposed, in person or remotely, so that participants can acquire some general knowledge about climate change and learn the necessary tools to participate in the work of the assembly (in the pilot a full day was allocated for training).

Deliberation. The permanent assembly meets in plenary every two months, in total four times. Each meeting, led by facilitators, is attended by experts and technicians from the municipality who provide members with technical and scientific support. Members are first given detailed information on the actions foreseen by the Air and Climate plan by municipal technicians, civil servants, and political decision-makers. Members can join working groups on the main areas of the plan and together draw up recommendations and new actions for the plan. Citizens' proposals are voted on twice a year, and

those approved by at least two-third of the assembly's participants are compiled in an annual report that is submitted to the municipality. The municipality then has two months to accept or reject the contents of the report, justifying its choices.

Follow-up. For the first cycle of the assembly, 8 proposals were drafted by the working groups, 5 of which were approved to be included in the 2023 report to the municipality. The municipality is committed to responding to proposals and recommendations of the assembly in a timely manner. For any recommendation adopted by the municipality, it is committed to follow-up on its implementation. Each proposal is assigned to an internal referee in the municipality who is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the proposal in the following year. At the end of 2023, the impact of these proposals on the effective implementation of the climate strategy and actions will be determined.

At the end of their period of service, members are offered new opportunities to expand their involvement in support of the municipality's climate action plan on a voluntary basis: first, they can volunteer to participate in the municipality's activities; second, they can join existing environmental associations, or third, they can become part of an ecosystem of other associations that actively monitor the assembly's implementation process. This external evaluation committee, composed of different stakeholders, not only monitors the functioning of the assembly, and studies its social impact, but may also propose to change or add some rules.

Involvement of the general public. The Assembly is part of a broader process of public engagement around the Plan. Every two years, the Air and Climate Plan is revised and the public is invited to submit "observations" on the plan and the technical Annexes (called appendices and adaptation Guidelines). An "observation" is understood as a proposal on specific topics or paragraphs or for the whole plan. Currently, no relationship exists between these public submissions and the work of the Assembly.

Lessons learned from the Pilot. Next year, the pilot project will be made permanent and implemented with some changes. For example, the duration of the assembly will be extended from six months to a full year and the frequency of plenary sessions will be increased to every month.

During the pilot, members were asked to contribute their own ideas for the plan. Next year, members will additionally be asked to assess the municipality's activities (according to a color-coded system) that will reduce the barrier for participation. Three full-day training activities will be provided, and, in addition, members will be able to attend training seminars every two weeks on a voluntary basis.

Paris Citizens' Assembly

<https://www.paris.fr/pages/assemblee-citoyenne-20187>

The Citizens' Assembly of Paris is the result of proposals put forward by Parisians during the consensus conference launched by the City of Paris in 2019, which mirrored the great national debate in France. In October 2021 the citizens' assembly was adopted in the rules of procedure of the Paris City Council. The central, permanent body is the "Assemblée Citoyenne de Paris" (citizens' assembly of Paris), consisting of 100 citizens selected by lot. It has several tasks and competences that go beyond climate. For instance, it can also submit a wish ("vœux") – a request that has no legal standing – to each meeting of the Paris Council via the vice-mayor for participation. The wish must first be voted on by the citizens' assembly in plenary session, and the vice-mayor submits it in the exact wording received. A wish is a form of declaration or motion, similar to a declaration of interest, which can be formulated

on a wide range of subjects that do not necessarily fall within the city's powers. It is a way of putting issues on the council's agenda that must then be debated and the response justified. The executive of the municipal council is bound to justify why it accepts or rejects the wish. If the wish is accepted, then the city must implement it and be accountable after six months and one year of implementation. Once a year, the assembly has the right to draft a bill and propose it to the City Council for a vote. If it is passed, it becomes part of the law and must be implemented as such. Initially the assembly had the right to establish ad-hoc citizens' juries (similar to the Ostbelgien model) to analyse a particular issue and submit their recommendations to the assembly, but after the first annual cycle, this was abandoned (see lessons learned below).

Random selection & Participation. Any resident of Paris over the age of 16 years can be randomly selected, regardless of nationality. Members of the assembly have a mandate of a year, that can be extended by six months. Most of the time, the 100 members of the assembly work in thematic working groups, but at least twice a year they come together in plenary session.

Deliberation. Last year, the thematic groups selected by the assembly members included "social & education issues", "environment", and "public spaces". The members of each thematic group determine the priority areas on which they want to focus. Expert hearings and site visits are then organized. Additional training is provided for interested members (e. g. on public speaking or understanding the news). At the end of this first phase, each working group submits a mid-term "Summary Notebook" ("Carnet de synthèse") to the executive, setting out the status of their work and their questions. Based on these summary notebooks, the Paris executive proposes to each working group a mandate for the second phase of their work which focuses on developing recommendations. After four months of hearings, visits and deliberations, members submit their recommendations to the Paris Executive. Building on their recommendations, the members of the citizens' assembly take part in co-construction workshops with departments of the city and elected representatives. In January 2023, these workshops resulted in the drafting of three citizens' wishes, which were voted unanimously by the workshop participants.

Follow-Up. To ensure that Parisian citizens can monitor the progress of the commitments, a "follow-up right" has been introduced. The City of Paris undertakes to report regularly in writing to the members of the citizens' assembly on the implementation of the recommendations adopted –first when the report is submitted and then, again a year later. For the first cycle, the citizens will meet for a follow-up meeting in December 2023 (9 months after the adoption of the wishes). Then, together with the administration, they will decide which meetings to convene, who to meet with, etc. This formalized follow-up process involves political groups, the administration, the assembly members, and the relevant elected representatives.

Agenda-Setting Competence & capacity to initiate other deliberative processes. The assembly plays a central role for other ad-hoc participatory and deliberative processes. In the first cycle, the assembly had the right to convene a separate citizens' jury once a year to delve deeper into a topic area of the assembly's choice. Each jury consists of 17 members drawn by lot from the Paris population and their work can last up to 3 months. The jury submits a report and recommendations to the citizens' assembly, which converts them into a local bill. The bill is then presented to the city council for a vote. The assembly also had the task of monitoring the follow-up to these decisions. This approach was abandoned after the first year, with the assembly taking on this policy development work.

Lessons learned from the first cycle. With feedback from the first cycle, the way the assembly works has been adapted: the assembly no longer convenes a citizens' jury but divides itself into three working groups. The first working group is called the deliberation workshop, which aims to produce a "délibération" (in French "deliberation" has different meanings). This is a draft bill for the City of Paris, on which the city council will vote. For this group, the Mayor of Paris proposed three themes and the 100 members voted on the theme they wanted to work on this year, "getting people off the streets for the long term". For a year, they will be working on this subject and in June 2024, they will produce a draft bill. The City of Paris will then have to provide the financial, human, and material resources to carry out what they have planned.

The second working group is more of an exploratory workshop, allowing members to choose for themselves the themes they wish to work on over the coming year to produce a "wish" (as practiced in the first cycle). In September 2023, the members decided on the topic of greening the city.

The third working group involves all 100 members: the "space for monitoring and questioning". This forum meets before each Paris City Council and enables members to find out what the major issues of the day are, and to meet elected representatives to ask them questions. Typically, the November and December Paris Council meetings are devoted to the city budget. Citizens can also ask to meet elected officials at the city level to ask him or her a question.

To strengthen the institutionalization of the assembly, in early October 2023 the municipality included the rights granted to the citizens' assembly in the Paris Council's internal rules of procedure, i.e. the right to propose wishes or deliberations. This anchoring of the citizens' assembly in the rules of procedure should help to make it more difficult to abolish the assembly and its powers after the next municipal elections in 2026.