# Designing for impact: the next stage for climate assemblies

**Provocation**

**Graham Smith**                                                            **January 2022**

*[Graham Smith](#) is the [Chair](#) of the Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development*

# Introduction

If the recent COP26 tells us anything, it's that different ways of making hard decisions about our shared futures are needed. Too often critical decisions are made through last minute compromises, hammered out amongst small groups of negotiators behind closed doors, with the voices of those who are most vulnerable to the ravages of the climate crisis excluded.

Contrast this with what the OECD calls a **deliberative wave** – an increase in the use of institutions such as citizens' assemblies and juries that bring together randomly-selected everyday people to learn, deliberate and come to recommendations on pressing and often controversial areas of policy. At the crest of that wave are climate assemblies. Depending on how liberal you are with your definition of climate assemblies, we have witnessed between 6 to 8 **national-level assemblies in Europe**, with at least another three on the way. Even more have taken place at local and regional level and a **Global Assembly** is completing its first round of deliberations on global climate action. Without doubt the highest profile assembly has been the **French Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat** commissioned by President Macron. While much criticised for the extent to which recommendations were modified and rejected by government and parliament, it strongly influenced the content of the recent Climate and Resilience Law. Equally important, the Convention and its recommendations have become a topic of significant public debate.

What is clear from these assemblies is that ordinary people are willing and able to learn, deliberate and come to recommendations on climate action, typically outstripping the ambition of national governments.

The other clear lesson that has emerged is that much more creative work is needed on how to integrate these bodies into the political system more effectively. While assemblies share relatively similar internal structures (stratified random selection and facilitated deliberation), their relationship with established political institutions varies. The French Convention stands as the only assembly commissioned by the head of state and the only one where that commissioner promised (later

rescinded) "no filter" in the application of its recommendations. **Climate Assembly UK** is the only assembly commissioned by Parliamentary Select Committees. **Ireland** and **Scotland** are examples of where government cooperated with parliament in commissioning and responding to the assemblies. The **Danish Assembly**, currently in its second phase, is commissioned by the Climate Ministry. The **German Assembly** is an outlier – commissioned by civil society organisations to put pressure on the parties fighting the federal election and then engaging in coalition negotiations.

The variety of commissioners is in itself not a problem – it indicates the extent to which this model of engagement displays much needed adaptiveness.

# The impact of deliberative processes

But an abiding concern is that not enough attention has been placed on how to couple these deliberative processes with relevant policy systems to enhance their impact. While practitioners have done an amazing job in developing this new participatory technology, arguably we have not placed the same level of careful attention, creativity and resources on the modes of integration with policy making and policy cycles. How to ensure that the processes and recommendations land in ways that affect meaningful change in climate policy practices and outcomes?

This has at least three elements.

The first is how to "couple" these participatory spaces with policy systems. How to ensure that the recommendations resonate with policy makers. This means embedding a commitment to respond. The most radical, but rare, practice can be found in citizens' assemblies in Poland, where city mayors have committed to adopt any measures that receive supermajority support (80%) amongst members. More common is the example of Scotland, where the government is required to formally respond to the assembly's recommendations within 6 months of it being tabled in parliament. But it will need more than formal coupling for assemblies to have effect. Effective coupling will also involve engaging with relevant policy actors not just after the report has been tabled, but before and during the assembly: making the case for the value of the assembly process and preparing actors across policy systems to receive, consider and respond to the outputs. It also requires careful consideration of timing. The Danish Assembly, for example, is intended to be coupled with the national climate policy process, providing inputs at relevant points where influence is timely and possible.

A second weakness in assemblies is that they are poorly designed for **ensuring oversight and scrutiny**. In most instance, assemblies deliver their recommendations and then the members go home! Who is responsible for overseeing the response of government and other actors? Here the French Convention has spearheaded innovation in two ways. Members reconvened a number of months after its report was received by Macron to review progress (their view: generally negative). Scotland's Climate Assembly will also reconvene six months after tabling its report in parliament to assess the government's response. Again, in France many of the Convention members have remained active – in the NGO **Les 150** that they established and as commentators and activists in the media. Where the profile of the assembly and its members is high, these activities can increase public scrutiny of (in)action. In Scotland, the Assembly's Secretariat stayed in place for a number of months to promote the assembly's recommendations and to connect assembly members with relevant policy actors. Further creative work and resources are needed to ensure that post-recommendation oversight and scrutiny is given as much attention and priority in the design of the assembly process.

Finally, if responding to the climate crisis requires systematic changes, then this needs to be reflected in the work of assemblies – both internally and in their integration with the political process. Currently assemblies tend to produce a series of policy proposals. Rarely do they engage in **systems change thinking**: systematic consideration of our models of consumption and production that drive unsustainability and climate breakdown. Rarely do they confront the challenges of structural inequalities that drive climate injustice and vulnerabilities. Assemblies have begun to incorporate consideration of climate justice – the extent to which the French, Scottish and UK assemblies raised questions of fairness in their deliberations and reports is striking. Scotland's assembly incorporated creative moments in which members considered different potential net-zero futures. But we are only scratching the surface of how such structural considerations can be embedded in the workings of assemblies. How such considerations are to be coupled with a political system that tends to be deaf if not openly hostile to such thinking is even more vexing.

Climate assemblies are at the peak of the current deliberative wave. Pushing the metaphor to breaking point, the danger is that this first wave will come crashing down and climate assemblies will be viewed as a disappointment by both policy actors and activists. An alternative reading sees climate assemblies surfing the following waves, adapting practices in order to more effectively couple with policy systems and cycles in ways that advance our collective response to the climate crisis.

For more on the evolving practice of climate assemblies, see the work of the **Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies**.