Key drivers of impact

How to unleash the potential of climate assemblies

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In a well-run assembly, people flourish. They understand the values of respect, dignity, productive collaboration, community, purpose and an overall sense of belonging. Cultivating the democratic capabilities within our system is the core of a deliberative process. As such, the principles that underpin a citizens’ assembly are the core of solving the current issues within our democratic system.

— PRACTITIONER, PROCESS DESIGNER
Executive summary

Every climate assembly aims to have an impact, whether it is impact on policy making and the political debate (policy impact), on behaviour and the public debate (social impact) or on the democratic system as a whole, equipping it for long term decision making in order to adequately mitigate and adapt to climate change (systemic impact).

A sound process, adhering to the OECD’s Good Practice Principles for deliberative processes, is the minimal requirement for impact. This research finds however that, given a well-run process, three main drivers for impact are critical: the question, the mandate plus political follow-up, and a robust communications strategy. This third key factor has received little attention up until now, both in practice and in research. Communication should not be an after-thought, but a significant part of the strategy and the budget of climate assemblies. Moreover, as deliberative processes do not fit the regular conflict-based narratives used by most media outlets, it is necessary to help develop new forms of journalism for this new form of democracy.

These three key impact drivers are relevant for every citizens’ assembly, whether it is a local, national, ad hoc or permanent assembly dealing with climate or other public issues.
If the 2010s were the decade of what the OECD terms the ‘deliberative wave’, the 2020s promise to be the decade of the ‘green deliberative wave’ in Europe. Since the Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat in 2019, a rapid rise in the number of climate assemblies has occurred. Following the French Convention, national climate assemblies have taken place in the UK, Scotland, Denmark, Germany, Finland, and at the time of writing, are taking place in Luxembourg, Austria and Spain. On a local level dozens of climate assemblies have been organised throughout Europe.

All these climate assemblies aim to have some form of impact. This may be impact on policy making — for instance new climate policies or affecting the political debate on climate — or impact on society as a whole — for instance by increasing awareness on climate change or encouraging behaviour change. The intended impact may also be more systemic, such as increasing trust in the democratic system or equipping it for long term decision making which is crucial for adequately mitigating and adapting to climate change.

Most, if not all, conveners and designers of climate assemblies agree that a sound process is a key prerequisite for impact. Most assemblies adhere to the Good Practice Principles for deliberative processes, formulated by the OECD. Implementing these principles is the minimal requirement for legitimacy and thus for impact. But are these principles equally important impact factors? Are there other key factors that drive impact?

Through literature reviews and in-depth interviews with policy makers, practitioners, academics, participants and media professionals, we have identified three key drivers of impact. We find that, given a well-run process, two design principles in particular are main drivers of impact: **purpose** (the remit / question) and **accountability** (mandate and political follow-up). A third key factor for impact, which has received little attention up until now — both in research and in practice — is a robust, inclusive **communications strategy**.

This report, produced for the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA), analyses these key drivers of impact, paying particular attention to the third factor, given the extent to which communication strategies have been relatively neglected. Recommendations for action for each impact factor are offered. The report ends with a brief review of the different types of impacts and how these can be affected by the three drivers.
Defining the question or task of the climate assembly means defining its potential impact. Therefore, the scope of the question should fit the purpose: a broad scope may help to kickstart a public debate — as the Convention Citoyenne in France did — or it may generate guiding principles for future policy. But a broad scope may also have limitations. It can lead to a large number of recommendations, which increases the risk of cherry picking by the commissioning authority — ignoring ambitious or controversial recommendations. A broad question may also lead to very general recommendations that are difficult to translate into policies, leaving a lot of room for interpretation and speculation as to whether a policy is actually following the recommendation or not.

If the goal of the climate assembly is to reach actionable recommendations, the question should be both specific and quantifiable. A tighter question tends to limit the number of recommendations (and hence the room for cherry-picking), prevents generic solutions, and provides the commissioning authority with clear guidance for action. It can however also be a way of limiting participants — a tighter question may inhibit people from considering more systemic solutions.

**Having a broad question can help authorities clarify what their role is with regard to the climate emergency. What the citizen panel has done for the town council is help them identify what they could do and what their powers could be and now they recognize they actually have tremendous convening power bringing together lots of groups that try to put together a local vision for the climate emergency.**

— PRACTITIONER ON LOCAL CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLIES
1.1 Recommendations

Whether the scope is broad or narrow, the question should be ambitious. This means that something should be at stake, and that the question should have political relevance as well as relevance to the public. If the question is not politically relevant it will be difficult to ensure political follow-up. If it is not relevant to the public, it will do little for public trust or the public debate. On the other hand, if people consider the topic as important and challenging, it can spark public debate and signal political trust in citizens — which in turn can increase trust in politics and/or democracy (see examples 1-3).

A specific question is more attractive and easier to report on for journalists than a generic topic.

The chances of impact on policy making, on the political and public debate, as well as on citizens' democratic self-confidence, increase when recommendations are clear, convincing and well-thought-out. For this a solid process is required, providing participants with enough time, balanced information and room for deliberation.

Both social and systematic impact can increase when participants or even the wider society, are engaged in setting the agenda. The broader public may for instance have the opportunity to suggest the topic or choose from a range of options.

Ask a communication expert to give feedback on the formulation of the question: what would make it more comprehensible, attractive, engaging?

Have the question reviewed by people with experience in engaging young people and other groups that are usually underrepresented in participatory processes, to advise on comprehensibility and clarity.

Further guidance on framing remits for climate assemblies can be found on the KNOCA website.
Example 1

One of the five topics considered by the Irish Citizens’ Assembly (2016-2018) was ‘How the state can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change’. Although the assembly members were given only four days to learn about and discuss this broad topic, they came up with 13 recommendations. A special parliamentary committee was established that supported the majority of the assembly proposals and led to the declaration of a climate emergency by the Dáil (Lower House). The report of the committee heavily influenced the cross-government Climate Action Plan published in June 2019 and the subsequent Climate Action Bill 2020.

Example 2

When the French Citizens’ Convention for the Climate was launched in 2019, President Macron promised “no filter” for the recommendations. At a public event, Macron received the 149 draft laws, regulations and referendums but in his speech immediately rejected a couple of the propositions. Over time, some of the proposals made it into the climate law, but many were abandoned with little public explanation. The government and parliamentary response led to extensive public debate about the Convention and climate policy more broadly - but had a negative impact on public trust in the government.

Example 3

In 2020, the Danish government adopted a climate law that requires emissions in Denmark to be reduced by 70% by 2030. It also stipulated that a climate assembly should be organised to hear from citizens how to reach this ambitious goal. Denmark’s Climate Assembly was organised to fit with the annual climate policy planning process. Assembly members were empowered to decide which issues to focus on. The first round of the Danish climate assembly produced 73 recommendations, encouraging the government to be courageous and take forward the ambitious measures they proposed. Each recommendation was carefully crafted to provide observations and assessment of the current context alongside the specific proposal. The government has committed to treating the assembly in the same way as “social partnerships” with key social and economic sectors. It is too soon to know what kind of policy impact the assembly will have.
Key impact factor 2

Mandate and follow-up

However ambitious and well formulated the question, and however well-run the assembly, its policy impact will be negated if the recommendations do not receive proper political follow-up. A (perceived) lack of follow-up may also lead to less public trust in the political and democratic system. Therefore, it is vital that the assembly’s mandate is clear beforehand, and that a well-defined follow-up plan is in place. By providing a clear mandate to the assembly, the commissioning authority not only gives responsibility to citizens, but also indicates that it values what citizens consider to be important. For successful follow-up, it is vital that civil servants feel comfortable with the process of a citizens’ assembly: they need the will and skills to translate recommendations into policies.

I accepted the invitation to take part, because it was the first time people with power asked young people how they live and how they see the future.

— PARTICIPANT IN CLIMATE ASSEMBLY
2.1 Recommendations

Chances of policy impact increase when the legislative body supports the mandate and the commissioning of the assembly.

A broad coalition of political stakeholders should formulate the mandate and be formally responsible for the follow-up.

A detailed follow-up plan should be formulated beforehand. This ‘roadmap’ should indicate when and how the commissioning authority will respond to the recommendations. The plan should include regular (e.g., 3–6 month) intervals for updates.

The response of the commissioning authority should be in writing and address each individual recommendation, regardless of whether they are being adopted or not. Positive responses to recommendations should come with a follow-up plan indicating when and how this recommendation will be taken forward.

Citizens’ assemblies are a new phenomenon to many civil servants: in order for them to provide meaningful follow-up they need to be comfortable with the process. Organise workshops for civil servants beforehand explaining the workings of a citizens’ assembly and giving them the opportunity to explore their role in both the feedback process and the follow-up process (see example 4).

Organise at least two moments when (some) participants and stakeholders are invited back to discuss follow-up with the public authority.

Organise a follow-up session of the whole assembly when it can review and publicly comment on the response by the commissioning authority (see example 5).

Throughout the whole process (preparation through to follow-up) a designated person or team should be in charge of monitoring the follow-up plan and see to it that the recommendations are taken up in the policy cycle. Ideally this person or team is independent of the commissioning authority (see example 6).

Within the assembly, implement a review process on draft recommendations to improve their potential impact on policy. For instance, involve legal experts and civil servants to provide advice in the final stage of formulating recommendations, to ensure that they are in a form that can be translated into policy. It must be made clear that these experts cannot influence the content of the recommendations, only their technical form, and that final decisions on the content of proposals rests with the citizens.

In some cases, when the constitution or topic requires so, a referendum may be held (see example 7). A multi option referendum may be preferred over a binary referendum to prevent polarisation and in recognition of the complexity of the topic. Referenda can be polarising and used as a strategy to overturn recommendations, so judicious use should be made of this option.

Further guidance on preparing a public authority for a climate assembly can be found on the KNOCA website.
Example 4

Local citizens’ assemblies in Poland have provided workshops for civil servants to familiarise them with the workings of the process and to help them understand what their role may be. Civil servants can be invited as experts to talk about their field of expertise, they can provide (technical) feedback on proposals or budgetary information, and they can participate in the Q&A-session many Polish assemblies organise at the end of the process. This gives members the opportunity to ask questions to civil servants and to formulate recommendations in a way that best align with the policy making process.

Example 5

Scotland’s Climate Assembly convened for seven weekends between November 2020 and March 2021. In June 2021 the 81 recommendations were submitted to the government, which had committed to responding within six months. The assembly members met again in February 2022 to discuss the political reaction and to formulate a statement of response. Read the response, or watch this video.

Example 6

In German speaking Belgium (‘Ostbelgien’), a permanent citizens’ council was established in 2019. This permanent body, consisting of 24 randomly selected citizens who participate for 1.5 years, selects topics for ad hoc citizens’ assemblies. The permanent citizens’ council is also responsible for monitoring the political follow-up of the recommendations from the ad hoc assemblies.

Example 7

In Ireland a referendum is required in the case of a constitutional change. The citizens’ assembly on the eighth amendment (abortion law) was followed by a referendum: 67% of the Irish people agreed with the citizens’ assembly proposal, leading to a change in the constitutional status of abortion.

In the Canadian province British Columbia (2004), a citizens’ assembly took place on electoral reform. The assembly recommended the replacement of the existing ‘first past the post’ system with a ‘single transferable vote’ system. A referendum was required to implement this proposal. Although all 79 districts voted in favour of the assembly’s recommendation, the overall vote fell short of the required supermajority of 60%, and thus the proposed reform was rejected.
Key impact factor 3
Media and communication strategy

In order for a climate assembly to be perceived as legitimate by people not taking part, and for its outcomes to be understood and supported, it needs to be a visible and recognised part of society. An intensive, well designed and inclusive communication strategy is vital to inform and engage both citizens as well as civil society. Too often climate assemblies take place 'in the shadows', without the wider public being aware of them. Although every practitioner stresses the need for a strong media and communications strategy, they find it difficult to make it a priority because of a lack of time, resources or knowledge. As a result, communication is developed on the go, and outreach to media is generic and highly dependent on contacts that conveners happen to have.

Even for experienced communication experts developing an effective communication strategy is challenging. The deliberative process does not align with most media formats in which conflict, drama and binary 'pro-con' framing are dominant. As a result, journalists find it difficult to report on relatively harmonious climate assemblies and major media outlets are hard to convince that climate assemblies provide captivating narratives.

Below we provide general communication recommendations and examples before offering more specific recommendations and examples for communication strategy, media strategy and new forms of journalism.
3.1 General communication recommendations

At minimum, set up an assembly website that provides basic information, including on recruitment, timetable, presentations, and FAQs, etc. If it is possible to livestream and upload video content of presentations to the assembly to YouTube, this will increase visibility. See for instance the websites of the Scottish and German climate assembly.

As early as possible, hire a professional media or communication team for strategy and engagement.

Communication should not be an afterthought, but a significant part of the budget. Dedicate significant funding specifically for communication and media campaign.

Define milestones in the process (start, presentation by a well-known speaker, presenting the recommendations) and prepare press conferences well in advance (see example 8).

Pay special attention to communicating the outcomes and refer to the follow-up plan formulated by the commissioning authority. Focussing on the outcomes can bolster democratic confidence among the wider public as it shows what citizens like them are capable of. Referring to the follow-up plan helps to keep both public and media alert to the political promises made beforehand and may prevent recommendations from being ignored or overlooked.

Members can play a key role as spokespersons for both the assembly itself and to raise awareness of the topic of climate change. This may have a ripple effect: non-participants may get inspired to change their behaviour and come to realise that they can exercise this democratic power as well.

Provide basic media training to participants who indicate that they are willing to act as spokespersons. Not to script their answers, but to make them feel more comfortable talking to the press. Having a pool of citizen spokespeople reduces the risk that journalists only talk to politicians and officials.

Provide participants with tools to raise awareness in their own community, for instance by co-creating with them a "participants' press kit" with new images and video content added regularly. Make it as easy as possible for people to share information through social media.

Facilitate meetings where participants can talk to the wider public to inform and engage people, and to harvest input (see example 9).

Engage online influencers to post on the climate assembly well in advance and throughout the process. Discuss with them beforehand what they think would make an interesting frame.

Produce information and education materials for community groups, schools, NGOs, etc. This helps to generate broader public conversations before, during and after the assembly (see example 10).
Example 8

At the start of Climate Assembly UK in January 2020, the members were welcomed by Sir David Attenborough. Attenborough did not address the assembly as an expert (although he gave his views on climate change), but to express his gratitude to the members for giving up four weekends to take part. His appearance and speech spiked media attention for the assembly.

Also in January 2020 the French Citizens' Convention for the Climate asked President Macron to act as a witness during their fourth session. Although journalists had been present since the start of the assembly, media attention had been modest. For the first time, not only climate journalist reported on the assembly, but political journalists as well, leading to substantially more media attention.

Example 9

During the Dutch citizens' assembly on electoral reform (2006), regional meetings were organised throughout the country where members of the assembly listened to the opinion of other Dutch citizens about the current electoral system and possible improvements. Although these meetings predominantly drew members of the public interested in politics, it contributed to the public awareness of the assembly and its topic.

Example 10

In Scotland a campaign was launched to ‘pre-engage’ society well before the start of the climate assembly (2021). This included developing and distributing educational material for schools. Throughout the whole process the Youth Parliament and schools were engaged: inclusion of their recommendations within the final report helped raise the profile of the climate assembly.
3.2 Recommendations for communication strategy

Civil society can be an important ally to generate attention and to get the message across. Reach out to civil society networks to gain support for the process and the outcomes and include stakeholders. Do not use bulk communication, but as much in person communication as possible.

Actively invite civil society actors in the preparation phase to examine what is ‘in it for them’ and what they need to engage their networks.

Send out an open call for input beforehand to engage civil society and (unknown) stakeholders. Actively reach out to civil society networks to encourage them to respond to the open call and raise awareness about the climate assembly (see examples 11 and 12).

Communication strategies are generally focused on intrinsic climate values (the need for mitigation, for sustainability etc), but communication should also include reference to egoistic values such as personal growth and financial benefits — this may range from the financial benefits of insulating your home to projects that enable citizens to become co-owners of wind turbines and share in the profits.

The communication strategy should engage people not only through rational arguments but through emotions as well. They may feel anxious or worried about possible changes in their daily lives, or they may feel powerless with regard to climate change. Acknowledge these emotions instead of trying to minimise them with rational arguments.

Reach out to international network organisations (for example, KNOCA, Democracy R&D, FIDE) to help to communicate across borders: for other assemblies to have more impact they should be able to learn from good and not-so-good practices. Add at least one English page to the assembly’s website, at minimum providing the basic design features of the assembly, a summary of the process and the follow-up strategy.

Climate assemblies are mostly focused on rational climate arguments, such as the need for mitigation, preserving nature or protecting the environment. Some altruistic values are addressed in the ‘future generations’ rhetoric. But to engage people, emotions and personal values should be addressed as well. Pay attention to egoistic values, such as personal growth or financial benefits of sustainable energy, and on hedonic values, such as a more comfortable life.

— SOCIAL SCIENCE RESEARCHER
Example 11

A citizens’ assembly in the Polish city Gdańsk addressed the topic of how to increase civic engagement. As schools can play a role in cultivating civic engagement, students were identified as stakeholders. But who to invite? The conveners developed a method to randomly select pupils from different age groups and different schools. To bring them into the process, workshops were organised for students to discuss the topic and to examine what they needed to cultivate civic engagement in their school.4

Example 12

Before the start of the Amsterdam climate assembly (2021), an open call was sent out: citizens, companies and organisations were invited to submit a two-pager or a 1,5 minute video explaining their views on how to reach the city’s target of emissions reduction (advertisements and other commercial input were not accepted). All submissions were published on the assembly’s website. Members could use the input for self-study, but could also invite submitters to deliver a presentation elaborating on their proposal.
3.3 Recommendations for media strategy

Help journalists by creating content such as short articles, summaries, ready to use social media posts, video interviews with participants, daily recap videos. Clips from livestreamed sessions can be used for these short recap videos.

Livestreamed sessions should remain available on the website in full length as long-term source material for both journalists, researchers and the public.

Differentiate the media offering by developing different types of videos, texts, social media content, and employ different tones of voice, complexity, media for different groups and outlets. Have a media content producer available throughout the process.

Invest in engagement with journalists to facilitate high-quality reporting, and to build long term relations.

Journalism is looking for new formats every day. Tap into this by discussing with journalists and media outlets how to create formats that transcend the conflict based narrative and instead provide room for reflection and discussion. Offer workshops or information sessions, taking advice on the form this should take to facilitate their needs.

It is necessary to enable media ecosystems that do not work based on reactive feedback loops but rather as spaces for reflection and discussion.

— EXPERT ON MEDIA AND DEMOCRACY
3.4 Recommendations for new forms of journalism

Although deliberative processes are at odds with the regular binary and conflict based media format, some journalists and media outlets are paving the way for new forms of journalism that are equipped to report on new forms of democracy. Advocates and organisers of climate assemblies should actively support and invest in these emerging forms of journalism, for instance by cocreating workshops or seminars with journalists and media outlets.

Example 13

German journalist Bastian Berbner turned Ireland’s Constitutional Convention that tackled same-sex marriage into a moving story about finding common ground. While portraying just two participants and their unlikely road to friendship, Berbner provides an engaging view of the workings of a citizens’ assembly. The story appeared in the Süddeutsche Zeitung and was awarded the True Story Award 2019.


Example 14

The documentary ‘Les 150’ follows participants of the French climate citizens’ assembly – not while they are taking part, but afterwards. By not focussing on the process, but on the transformative experience it has been to the participants, this documentary communicates in a personal way how participants have discovered both the urgency of climate change as well as their own empowerment.

‘Les 150 - des citoyens s’engagent après la convention citoyenne pour le climat’, documentary by Yann Arthus-Bertrand.

Example 15

How to explain an extensive deliberative process in a fifty minute broadcast? The Dutch tv programme ‘Tegenlicht’, which focusses on new social and political developments, staged a citizens’ assembly to show how it works. The director took the creative liberty of leaving out specific elements in order to focus on the deliberation itself. Eight people with ‘indispensable jobs’ (nurse, police officer, teacher, farmer, waste collector etc) were invited to deliberate on the future of the Netherlands and how they would divide the national budget if they had their say.

‘De top der onmisbaren’ (The summit of indispensables), VPRO, directed by Britta Hosman.
Annex

Recognising different forms of impact

The impact of climate assemblies and citizens’ assemblies more broadly is often mainly understood as policy impact: to what extent have the recommendations been translated into law? What have the effects been on new policies? While important, this is however a limited understanding of potential impacts. We distinguish two other forms of impact besides policy impact: social impact and system-level impact on democracy (systemic impact). The key impact factors outlined in this report can help to increase these different forms impact.

Policy impact

An ambitious question, a solid follow-up plan and an extensive communication strategy can lead to:

- More robust, legitimate, coherent climate policy.
- Speeding up the decision-making process.
- New climate laws and climate policies.
- Shifts in the attitudes of politicians and policy makers towards climate change.
- Deepening the political debate on climate.
- Levelling the playing field for the political debate on climate by providing a counterbalance to established lobby groups.
- More collaborations between political parties on climate change.

Social impact

Although the question and follow-up are relevant for social impact, the key factor for social impact is the communication strategy. An extensive strategy, opening up the learning process of the assembly members to the wider public, and facilitating the members to become spokespersons, can contribute to:

- More public debate on climate change and climate measures — for instance, more media attention, more op-eds, more online traction etc.
- Countering disinformation on climate and the power of established lobby groups.
- Increasing awareness on climate change among the public and civil society.
- Giving a voice to younger generations, their thoughts on climate change and their views of the future.
- Behavioural change: participants of climate assemblies often indicate that the assembly has been a transformative experience; they make more sustainable lifestyle choices and by acting as spokespersons they can cause a ripple effect in society.
- The forming of coalitions within civil society to collaborate on fighting climate change.
Climate Assemblies appeal to me because they take citizens seriously and involve them in policy at an early stage. I am in favour of these experiments with [...] democracy, not only at the national level but also at the local level. They give people a say in their living environment. If they’re well organised, citizens can help shape the transition. That’s what we need.

— CLIMATE SCIENTIST

Before the assembly I had never heard about the ‘green transition’, nor had most other participants. Now I understand how complex it is and that we need everyone to make it succeed. It needs much more attention, that’s why some of us [participants] have started a non-profit organisation to make other people aware of the green transition.

— PARTICIPANT IN CLIMATE ASSEMBLY

Systemic impact

Asking citizens for help to tackle climate change by formulating an ambitious question and giving them a meaningful mandate, can contribute to restoring trust between citizens and politics. A robust communications strategy is again significant for impact. When the wider public can witness this process and see that the recommendations are taken seriously, trust in politics and in fellow citizens may increase. This may also bolster ‘democratic self-confidence’: especially people from commonly underrepresented groups may feel empowered as they see that people they can identify with are involved in high-level decision making and understand that they could be selected next time. As a result, climate assemblies can have system-level impact, meaning that they do not only have a transformative effect on the participants or policy, but on the democratic system as a whole.

This systemic impact may consist of:

- Democratic empowerment among the participants and ideally the public at large — for instance, people become active in politics or in civil society to raise awareness and fight climate change.
- Empowering underrepresented groups by showing young people and people from marginalised communities that people ‘like them’ can take part in ambitious decision-making processes.
- Affecting the workings of the policy system, for instance equipping it better for long term decision making.
- Increasing trust in the democratic system.
- Increasing trust in politics.
- Increasing trust in citizens (on the part of policy makers as well as citizens themselves).
- Increasing use of deliberative processes.
- Increasing awareness among citizens that they have a political and democratic role in mitigating and adapting to climate change.
This KNOCA Knowledge Development Project aimed to identify the features of previous deliberative processes that have led to impact in order to improve climate assemblies in the future. We conducted 23 in-depth interviews with experts from policy, civil society, academia, deliberative practice, and two former assembly participants. Our findings are indicative and we advise further research to better understand the various pathways to impact. KNOCA has commissioned a number of other Knowledge Development Projects aimed at improving the quality and impact of climate assemblies. See the KNOCA website for more details [https://knoca.eu/](https://knoca.eu/).

### Endnotes


