



Policy Brief 2:2

Excerpt from the Swedish report Konsumtionens gränser. (The Limits of Consumption)

Citizens' assemblies – a tool for climate transition

Different forms of citizens' assemblies are now being tested in several European countries, at both local and national levels, as part of the work on climate transition. But what are in fact citizens' assemblies? What lessons can be learned from the assemblies that have been carried out? And how can they be designed to guide political decision-making?

What are citizens' assemblies and how are they used?

To reach the climate targets of the Paris Agreement, many researchers argue that far-reaching societal transformations are required, which have so far proven difficult to achieve. At the same time, contemporary party politics is often criticised for becoming increasingly professionalised, losing contact with the grassroots, and being shaped by short-term electoral cycles. Against this background, ideas about more participatory forms of democracy in decision-making have gained traction, including the use of so-called citizens' assemblies. Citizens' assemblies are based on the following principles:

- Members of the assembly are selected through a stratified random selection process, based on criteria that reflect population diversity, such as gender, age, place of residence, income, education, political orientation, etc, so as to mirror the population.
- The assemblies are tasked with developing proposals on one or more societal issues, usually commissioned by a public authority or government body, although in some cases they may be initiated by civil society organisations.
- The assemblies' deliberations take place over several days, often with financial compensation for participants. They include input from experts, structured discussions, collective listening, learning and idea development, and are facilitated by independent moderators.



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In several countries, citizens' assemblies, citizens' panels, or so-called deliberative mini-publics have been organised to provide input to both national and local policymaking. In France and Ireland, national citizens' assemblies on climate policy have been held, and many municipalities across the Nordic countries and Europe have worked with citizens' assemblies linked to climate and environmental issues, transport, infrastructure, or other complex and politically sensitive topics.

In Sweden, a national citizens' panel on sustainable food consumption was organised by the Swedish Food Agency in 2023, and a national citizens' assembly on climate was held in 2024 within the research programme Mistra FairTrans. In our research, we have examined the role that citizens' assemblies can play in the climate transition, with a particular focus on how they can strengthen municipalities' capacity for transformation. As a case study, we followed the first Swedish citizens' assembly organised by a municipality, conducted by the City of Gothenburg in 2024.

Lessons from implemented citizens' assemblies

What lessons can then be drawn from experiences with citizens' assemblies so far? Based on a review of previous research and our own empirical studies of the Gothenburg case, we have found that:

- Compared with conventional politics, the proposals developed by citizens' assemblies have often been more radical. Participants have shown themselves willing to accept stronger policy instruments related to lifestyle and consumption than many politicians may have expected. The proposed solutions are often more multifaceted, as different perspectives, everyday experiences from diverse social groups, and expert knowledge are brought into dialogue. Participants' attitudes tend to change through the process, and many describe a sense of pride in having taken part, as well as increased civic engagement.
- Compared with other forums, citizens' assemblies amplify a more representative range of voices. In traditional public consultations and dialogue processes, those who tend to speak are often articulate, highly educated, and frequently older men from the majority population. In media and public debate, opinion leaders and professional commentators are given significant space, while online forums are often dominated by loud voices with marginal but strongly held views. Since citizens' assemblies mirror population diversity, they provide politicians and public officials with an opportunity to listen to and better understand what is sometimes referred to as the "silent majority".
- So far, citizens' assemblies have had limited direct impact on policy outcomes. Experiences from several assemblies suggest that their proposals have only partially influenced actual political decision-making. In France, the climate citizens' assembly was followed by public criticism when political actors failed to live up to commitments made prior to the assembly. In some cases, the actual mandate of citizens' assemblies has also been unclear.



For a citizens' assembly to strengthen a municipality's transition, it is essential that the assembly has both freedom in defining its questions and a clear mandate.

How can capacity for climate transition be strengthened?

Based on these lessons, how can citizens' assemblies be further developed to help strengthen municipal capacity for transformation? First, it is crucial that citizens' assemblies function as independent fora that can be used regardless of which political majority is in power. Second, assemblies need a certain degree of autonomy, while still being given a clear assignment and a concrete question to address. It is also important that the assemblies are allowed to reformulate the question and propose solutions that go beyond the original scope. Third, there must be a clearly communicated process for how the assembly's proposals will be handled. Is the assembly intended primarily as an idea generator, from which politicians select proposals they support, or should there be a prior commitment that at least a certain share of the proposals will be formally processed and potentially implemented? And how should the further preparation of proposals be organised, given that proposals may span multiple administrative responsibilities and decision-making levels?

Overall, experiences with citizens' assemblies have been positive. However, the method is resource-intensive, and if assemblies are not carefully designed and communicated, they risk increasing public distrust in authorities and politicians. For citizens' assemblies to genuinely strengthen a municipality's transformative capacity, it is essential that they combine relative freedom in framing issues with a clearly defined mandate. They also need to be broadly anchored within the municipal organisation, so that the knowledge generated and the proposals developed become used in meaningful ways.

In Paris, Brussels, Milan, Newham in London, and Ostbelgium (the German-speaking community in Belgium), citizens' assemblies have been institutionalised and have become a permanent part of public decision-making. In this way, they have moved from a phase of testing and experimentation to becoming an integrated element of municipal governance processes. Perhaps this is a path worth exploring for Swedish municipalities as well?



Further reading – or ask questions using www.greenchat.se/eng

- Bradley, K. & Hagbert, P. (forthcoming). Citizens' assemblies – from experiment to transformative governance. Paper under review.
- Durrant, D., & Cohen, T. (2023). [Mini-Publics as an innovation in spatial governance](#). Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space
- OECD. (2020). [Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave](#). OECD Publishing, Paris

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For further information, see:
www.sustainableconsumption.se/en

Reference to this text

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