KNOCA
Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies

DRAFT GUIDANCE

SETTING THE REMIT FOR A CLIMATE ASSEMBLY: KEY QUESTIONS FOR COMMISSIONERS

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KNOCA is a European-based network that aims to improve the commissioning, design, implementation, impact and evaluation of climate assemblies, using evidence, knowledge exchange and dialogue. KNOCA documents climate assembly practice, identifies and disseminates best practice for impact and shapes future trends. You can find us and join KNOCA at https://knoca.eu/

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Summary

- Setting the remit means taking several important decisions that will influence the delivery and outcomes of the process.
- Context is crucial, and each assembly is different: the remit should be tailored to reaching the objectives set out for the assembly.
- Start by surfacing assumptions and agreeing on a common objective based on a shared understanding of the problem(s). You can revisit the common objective and understanding of the political problem when making decisions throughout the process.
- Policymakers, citizens, stakeholders, scientists, and participation experts all contribute knowledge relevant for setting the remit. Involving many different actors in remit decisions likely increases the quality and legitimacy of the process but will also take more time.
- Climate assemblies can deal with a broad range of themes, but not with all of them at the same time.
- Giving assembly members more power over setting the agenda has advantages and risks. If members are given control, past experience suggests they should be supported with input from experts about the implications of different options.
- Splitting up the assembly into sub-groups allows for covering more ground but can also reduce the legitimacy and robustness of results. Various options for learning across sub-groups exist to counteract these downsides.

Introduction

As an innovative method for policymaking and citizen engagement, climate assemblies have gained popularity in recent years. Among the first steps to take when running an assembly is setting the remit. A number of crucial decisions must be taken that will carry through the whole process. As climate assemblies differ in their objectives, political context, resources and designs, there is no single best way of making the right decisions. This document explains some of the decisions you will face, outlining a few options, and their risks and benefits.

A **remit** for a climate assembly refers to the specific question(s) that the mini-public is being asked to consider.

"As organisers, we weave the remit through everything and come up with structures that help answer the question; it's our anchor for the entire deliberation."

–Nicole Hunter, Mosaic Lab

In this document, we not only discuss the merits of different remits, but also who should be involved in setting the remit and how the remit can be delivered, in particular whether sub-themes and workstreams should be introduced to enable the assembly to cover more ground. This moves beyond a simple focus on the remit to an understanding that decisions about assembly design have a profound impact on framing, or the many choices around the types of information communicated and methods of presenting it in an assembly.[1]

Before diving into these issues, you should begin by asking the most fundamental question: What is the purpose of our climate assembly?

[1] See also KNOCA briefing Shaw, Wang and Latter, "How Does the Framing of Climate Change Affect the Conclusions Reached in Climate Assemblies?", June 2021. https://knoca.eu/the-framing-of-climate-change-within-climate-assemblies/

The diversity of climate assemblies

The increasing number of climate assemblies, climate juries and other deliberative structures has led to an expanding variety of formats and approaches. Some assemblies have helped municipal leaders formulate specific responses to discrete issues – how to tackle air pollution or get more people to use public transportation – while others have looked to citizens to propose overarching policies for cutting national emissions. Most assemblies meet ad hoc for days or weeks; a small number are standing bodies called upon regularly. Many assemblies are commissioned by government actors who decide on the remit themselves, while others may be launched by activists aiming to influence the policy process and local, national or indeed global conversations. While most assemblies are sortition-based, others reflect the diversity of public opinion through other means. This variety means that there is no singular correct way to set a remit – and indeed, practice continues to evolve.

> "Governance is very different from country to country: a citizens' assembly has a supplementary advisory function to a representative parliament in Denmark; whereas in the UK, the assembly gives the Parliament a chance for once to hear the voices of citizens. The philosophical meaning is very different across the world. That's why I would call the climate assembly a method framework, not a method per se."
>
> –Lars Klüver, Danish Board of Technology.

Why are we running this climate assembly?

Many people come together to organise a climate assembly, often with diverging views. They should agree on (or at least accept) **a common vision of the assembly's main objectives**. Working to a shared vision will increase the quality of the assembly.

Practitioners and academics interviewed for this research agree that **climate assemblies' *overarching function* tends to be to influence climate policy,** typically in the problem identification and policy formulation phases of a classic policy cycle, though they can also be used to scrutinise and evaluate proposals. Assemblies can have a broader legacy, additionally unlocking longer-term and broader-based societal impacts around both climate policy and democratic citizenship and culture[2].

Advocates often hope that the assembly will act as an accelerator for climate action – for example by easing political gridlock or counterbalancing the power of lobbies. Below are some typical

[2] Thorman, D., & Capstick, S. (2022). *Planning and assessing the impact and legacy of climate assemblies* (KNOCA Briefing No. 4). Retrieved from https://knoca.eu/the-legacy-and-impact-of-climate-assemblies/

objectives (or theories of change) that people involved with climate assemblies often implicitly or explicitly bring to the table:

- **Empowering citizens.** Renewing democracy by giving more power to citizens on issues of societal concern
- **Supporting policymakers.** Increasing policymakers' knowledge and certainty by providing ideas and insights on what actions citizens are willing to take
- **Countering the critics.** Enabling ambitious climate action by persuading or countering the power of critics and lobbyists in the political sphere
- **Persuading the public.** Influencing public attitudes and behaviour
- **Challenging the system.** Disrupting entrenched attitudes and practices by challenging current policies and elevating marginalised agendas

Some of these objectives may complement one another, while others may clash when it comes to reaching decisions around setting the remit. A common peril is to expect too much from assemblies, and it can be challenging to find common ground due to deeply held convictions regarding the primary function of the climate assembly. However, making these divergent perspectives visible and developing a shared **understanding of the political context are important starting points for agreeing on a common vision**.

It can be helpful to consider the type of output that you are hoping for to achieve the main objectives of the assembly. This can range from overarching guidance to concrete policy proposals and include:

- **Strategic targets**, e.g. to achieve net-zero emissions by a certain date
- **Recommendations on long-term strategic decisions**, e.g. guidance on what kind future scenarios citizens prefer
- **Guiding principles for designing policy**, e.g. on how costs and benefits ought to be fairly distributed
- **Proposals for concrete policy measures** to achieve strategic goals such as emission reduction targets or adaptation actions, e.g. to phase out coal or gas by a certain date, or how to allocate public investments

In reality, assemblies often provide both types of outputs. Deliberating and agreeing on targets, guiding moral principles, and strategies *before* translating them into concrete policy measures can increase coherence and consistency (and may lead to higher ambition).

Case 1: Overarching, direction-setting agenda or platform for climate action

In these assemblies, which are the most common, citizens deliver key messages, set out the most important areas for intervention, make specific proposals across a range of topic areas, and/or underscore principles and priorities for action on mitigation and/or adaptation. They tend to respond to broad questions, for example:

- "How should Scotland change to tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way?"
- "How should the UK meet its target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050?"
- "How should we work together to become carbon neutral?" (Jersey)

- “How can the State make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change?”
- “How to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by at least 40% by 2030, in a spirit of social justice?” (France)
- “How do we shape climate policy: good for us, good for our environment and good for our country?” (Germany)
- “A safer Spain in the face of climate change - how do we do it?".

The Danish Citizens Assembly on the Climate asked members to inform the process of transition in Denmark and specifically the annual Climate Action Plan process. The final outputs from these assemblies in many cases contained well over one hundred proposals of varying detail and scope, elucidation of principles and ethical considerations for prioritising action and general framing statements.

Assemblies with a broad remit are often focused on several priority thematic areas at the same time, chosen either by commissioners or the members themselves (see section entitled “Who should decide which sub-themes to cover?”), for instance electricity, mobility, food production, consumption, and so on. This allows participants space to comment on broader issues but also to produce focused recommendations within specific policy areas. In the Danish case, for instance, members produced several detailed, well-researched proposals on a narrow set of issues, selected from within the initially very open remit.

What assemblies with such broad questions do well:

- Grant participants a strong sense of ownership and freedom.
- Demonstrate the degree of social consensus for wide-ranging action on climate change and open the political space for public officials by demonstrating the extent of public tolerance for accelerated action and building momentum for more ambitious action.
- Leave space for dealing with systemic or cross-cutting issues; evaluation of different forms of justice, historical responsibility and ethical questions. These issues may not be included in the agenda, but a broad question can allow participants the space to tackle issues they deem relevant.
- Create a public debate and increase general climate literacy around causes and possible solutions for mitigation and adaptation -- when paired with a robust media and outreach strategy.
- Generate a more holistic and comprehensive package of proposals potentially exploring interdependencies between issues when allocated enough time to do so.

What can be challenging:

- Proposals can be less well-justified or reasoned due to time constraints and the need to address a broad range of issues, although much depends on the design of the assembly and available time.
- Proposals may lie outside the scope of the commissioning body to handle them, though officials can commit to working with the appropriate authority.

- It can be difficult to interpret priorities and create accountability around a wide range of proposals. Responding to proposals is an important and time-consuming undertaking.
- Dealing with multiple sub-topics may mean that a particular proposal may have benefited from the inputs of only a small group of assembly members.

Case 2: Focused proposals on specific climate policies

These delimit the remit more narrowly from the outset, soliciting input on particular areas of climate policy. Members in Devon, UK, were asked

1. *What should be the role of onshore wind in the Devon Renewable Energy Strategy?*
2. *What should be done to encourage less car use within Devon?*
3. *What would be the best ways of encouraging, or requiring, people to retrofit their homes, properties or business premises to reduce carbon emissions?*

In Poznan, Poland, assembly members were asked how to take care of the city's green areas in the context of climate change.

What assemblies designed for more focused proposals do well:

- Create a relevant package of proposals tailored to policy needs and timing
- Explain and justify the assembly's preferences in a way that provides rich guidance for policy-making
- Fully utilise the different perspectives in the assembly to craft proposals adapted to a range of societal needs
- Consider deeply an issue or issues in a way that policy makers themselves rarely have the time to do
- Make it easier for commissioners to respond to the proposal and for members and others to hold commissioners accountable for responding and acting on the proposals.

What can be challenging:

- Participants can feel more constrained if they did not select the themes.
- Issues that are outside of scope are by definition not addressed. Interdependencies may be missed, as well as cross-cutting and systemic issues.

Case 3: Evaluation of policy options or scenarios, or scrutiny of proposals

In these cases, the work of the assembly is strongly guided by specific inputs, and the task of the members is to select amongst options, give feedback and provide detailed explanations for their choices. In the UK, most of the recommendations emerged from scenarios and policy options created by expert leads from which the members chose; members generated their own additional recommendations on cross-cutting issues.

In Poznan, Poland, members were asked to decide whether or not the city should introduce a ban on coal furnaces for household heating, and then discussed how to introduce and apply the ban fairly.

In Grenoble, France, assembly members were asked to consider four different scenarios for a lower-carbon future, within the context of a metropolitan effort to curb emissions, and provide evaluations and feedback on these scenarios. Drawing on their knowledge of these scenarios, they built their own vision of a low-carbon society.

The Finnish citizens' jury on climate action assessed potentially controversial measures to be included in the new climate change policy plan.

What assemblies focused on evaluating options do well:

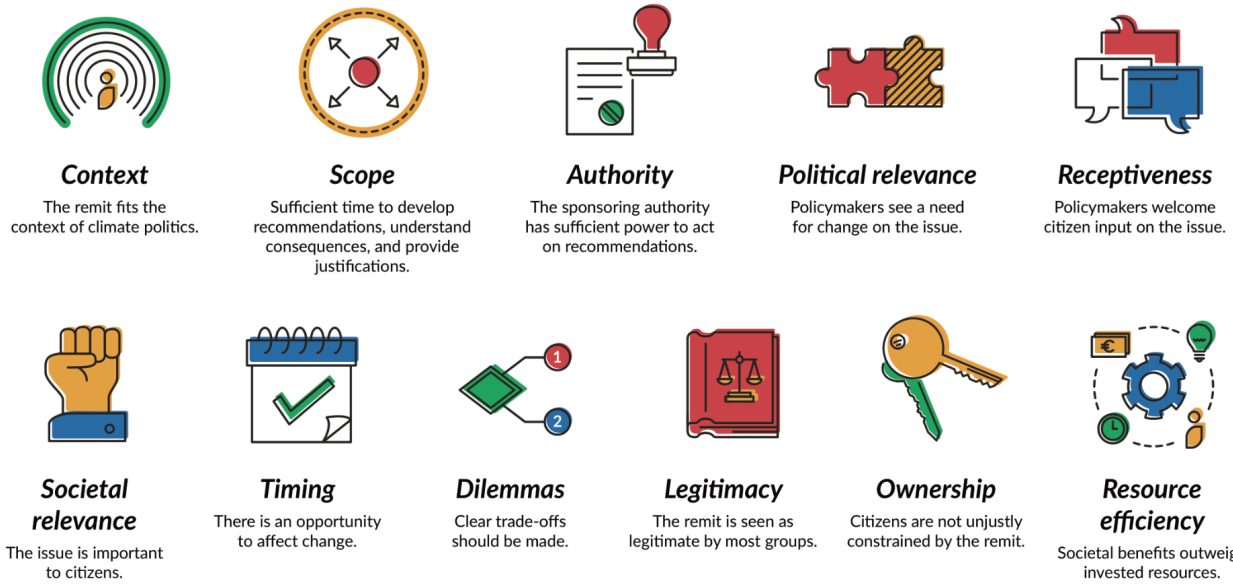
- Delve into the assembly's preferences, tolerances and trade-offs on options being considered by commissioners. This information can be particularly valuable to policy-makers to formulate appropriate and successful policy, including crafting incentives for behaviour change.
- Provide targeted, useful feedback that fits neatly into the policy process.

What can be challenging:

- As with more focused assemblies, many issues are out of scope, potentially creating frustration amongst assembly members.
- It does not provide assembly members with space to be creative in developing recommendations.

Who should be involved in choosing the remit?

The remit for a climate assembly should be timely and relevant for citizens and policymakers, fit the context of climate politics, be accepted by most groups, and consider the implications for delivery given the constraints of time and money (see figure and corresponding KNOCA guidance on "Guiding Principles for Setting the Remit of a Climate Assembly"). Depending on who is involved, more or less consideration is typically given to each of these aspects. As for all decisions, commissioners should consider the main objectives of the assembly when deciding whom to involve. Involving or even granting major control over setting the remit to different actors has various implications.



Experienced politicians or civil servants typically have a strong understanding of the climate political context, know the most politically relevant dilemmas, the timelines of the policy process, and which decision-making authorities may be responsible for acting on recommendations. Involving politicians and policy officials in setting the remit is also likely to increase their interest in the results (receptiveness). However, giving politicians or civil servants major control over setting the remit may reduce societal relevance, participants' sense of ownership, and legitimacy.

The wider public or assembly participants can give an indication as to what is relevant to citizens. Engaging participants likely boosts their sense of ownership over the process. However, giving citizens major control over setting the remit may reduce political relevance and risks not getting to the heart of pressing climate issues as scientists or policy experts would see them.

Scientists and policy experts from the various fields concerned with climate mitigation and adaptation can provide informed views on which areas are most relevant in terms of climate impact. However, giving them major control over setting the remit may reinforce dominant and technocratic framings, not getting to the heart of the moral dilemmas often underlying political inaction.

Stakeholders, such as interest groups and activists may productively challenge dominant agendas and introduce marginalised concerns. Involving them can also increase the assembly's legitimacy. However, engaging interest groups and activists can also decrease perceived legitimacy if perceptions of political bias emerge. Having stakeholders at the table will likely increase the diversity of perspectives but can slow down decision-making and generate conflict.

Participation experts including academics, delivery agencies and facilitators can contribute the necessary reality checks on what is suitable and feasible given the time and resources available, and bring in experience from other processes. However, delivery agencies may, at times, also be

constrained in challenging the commissioner or be wary of testing new practices. Involving both 'independent' participation experts and agencies can mitigate such problems.

From this overview, you might quickly conclude that it is best to involve all of these different actors. While this is certainly not a bad idea, it will involve more coordination, more disagreement, more time, and more work. Clearly defining roles, process structure and decision rules are important in developing mutual trust and a common vision. Professional facilitation can aid successful collaboration in remit-setting.

Case 1: The commissioner approach

Most assemblies to date have had their remit established by the commissioner. The Irish citizens' assemblies on same-sex marriage and abortion were trailblazers for national-level mini-publics. Recent processes, however, have been criticised for giving the government too much control over setting the remit (see box).

Too much government control?

David Farrell, who advised on assemblies in Ireland, the UK, and Belgium, criticised the latest Irish citizens' assemblies for their remits and lack of impact.

[T]he agenda is too tightly controlled by government, which can lead to rather daft issues being discussed, such as the length of the Irish president's term of office, the Taoiseach's power to the determine the date of Dáil elections, or the manner in which referenda are held. [...] Some might feel it right and proper that the government of the day should retain a tight hold over the agenda and outcomes of a citizens' assembly. But if that agenda is poorly designed and the output in large part ignored, then surely that begs a question over the point of the whole exercise. If public funds and time are to be spent on processes like this, then it would seem quite reasonable to expect a return on the investment. The agenda should, at least, be sensible and ideally also address an issue of sufficient weight to merit the outlay of resources and time. And the recommendations should be dealt with respectfully.

Prof. David Farrell, Irish Times, Feb 16 2022[3]

Case 2: The stakeholder approach

Scotland's Climate Assembly used a stakeholder approach. A broad mandate for the assembly was established through legislation, but the specific question was decided by the stewarding group composed of stakeholders, members of parliament, participation experts, and academics. An independently facilitated process was organised which led to the remit. Assembly participants or input from the wider public were not part of the process.

[3] https://www.irishtimes.com/opinion/we-may-have-overdone-it-on-citizens-assemblies-1.4803375

Case 3: The citizen approach

For the Danish assembly, a broad remit was established by the government, but the participants themselves decided which areas to prioritise–a theme we pick up below.

While it is not a climate assembly, the Ostbelgien permanent citizens dialogue shows us how a permanent assembly process can be established which gives decision making power on the remit to participants. A permanent citizens' council of 24 members serving for 18 months does not develop recommendations itself, but initiates and sets the agenda for ad hoc citizens' panels, and later monitors the implementation of their results.

How can the remit be delivered?

The design of the assembly should ensure that members address the remit and are able to produce the anticipated outputs. When a broad remit is set, organisers often decide to focus on several sub-questions or themes.

Which sub-themes should the climate assembly cover?

Previous assemblies have divided the work in myriad ways. Approaches include (and can mix):

- ***Carbon intensive sectors.*** Members focus on decarbonising the most carbon-intensive sectors such as electricity, heating, mobility, food and agriculture, construction, etc. Climate Assembly UK was asked to consider "the complex trade-offs involved in reaching decisions on issues including: how we travel; what we eat; what we buy; how we heat our homes; how we generate our electricity; how we use the land."
- ***Citizen relevance.*** Members focus on decarbonising systems to which they feel most connected or are most relevant to people's lives such as education, consumption, heating, or energy poverty. The Spanish assembly has five "life areas".
- ***Cross-cutting measures.*** Members focus on mitigation measures and interventions with high leverage, such as decarbonizing finance or carbon pricing.
- ***The regime for climate governance.*** Members propose measures to strengthen the legal framework for climate protection and/or introduce standing bodies or institutions focused on climate protection. Members in France proposed constitutional changes and the criminalisation of ecocide; Danish members suggested the institution of a permanent assembly on climate change.
- ***Guiding moral principles.*** Members focus on overarching moral principles that should guide decision-making such as different notions of justice or expanding moral considerations.
- ***Adaptation and restoration measures***. Members focus on how to react and build resilience to already unavoidable changes in the climate.

A climate assembly can effectively deal with all these issues - but not all of them at the same time. Focusing on issues that resonate with citizens can increase members' motivation and may be more suited if public and media attention is among the primary goals. However, it can also lead to a focus on issues that have less direct impact on reducing greenhouse gas emissions immediately or in the long run, and are not timely or relevant for policy-makers. The choice to focus on issues that

resonate with citizens is sometimes driven by a view that everyday people cannot deal with more complex, structural issues. Successful deliberative processes on issues like genetic engineering provide robust evidence against this argument. Just as for professional decision-makers, it all depends on how information is prepared and presented and the available time.

Who should decide which sub-themes to cover?

Just as with setting the remit, assemblies can approach delivering against a remit in several ways, including:

- Deciding in advance, generally with the guidance of experts, to focus members on specific sub-themes. This is the most common approach (e.g. French, German, UK assemblies)
- Giving members freedom to respond to the broad remit as they see fit. This can be done in two ways: (a) members learn about the climate context and then decide which issues to work on; (b) members decide on issues without expert input. Denmark's Climate Assembly tried both of these approaches in its two iterations. The organisers and members seem to have preferred the first approach as it allowed members to make a decision once they were made aware of the climate impacts of different options.
- Proposing potential sub-themes to the participants who then have final say of whether to keep or modify the proposal

The options of how to organise these decisions in practice are numerous, and how much power to give to participants in shaping the agenda is a recurring debate. The **advantages** of giving members of an assembly control include:

- Focusing on what is most important to citizens: granting members freedom to shape the agenda allows members to focus on their priorities and can enhance members' trust in the process.
- Fresh ideas: members can surface interlinkages and cross-cutting issues and come up with new and unconventional ideas.
- Empowerment and ownership: members' control over the agenda strengthens the sense of ownership over the results and the people-led character of the assembly.

The **challenges** from granting such a free hand to members include the following:

- Risk that issues most relevant to the policy cycle are not considered
- Potential mismatch between commissioners' expectations and members' priorities
- Complexity of climate: it can be challenging for members to know what is most significant for mitigation and adaptation
- Less time for process organisers to gather and prepare evidence on issues of citizen interest
- Remit and process design take time during the assembly, and can reduce the time available for learning, deliberating and crafting recommendations

If members are to be empowered to choose remit or sub-themes, the evidence suggests that this process needs support. Members will require guidelines and input from experts about the implications of different options.

Should the climate assembly be split into sub-groups?

Smaller processes like citizens' juries do not divide into sub-groups. Neither did the Irish Citizens Assembly when it dealt with climate. But dividing the participants into subgroups is a common practice in assemblies and can enable the assembly to cover substantially more ground.

Division into groups has downstream implications for the assembly and the process designed to support it: members may find it difficult to evaluate proposals that they were not involved in drafting. It can reduce the legitimacy and robustness of the proposals if each subgroup engages only a fraction of the total members. And it raises questions about how informed members are about proposals generated by other groups in which they did not participate.

Assemblies have dealt with members' disparate involvement in workstreams in different ways: in the French Convention Citoyenne, members were able to interact with other groups – a practice which also aided in addressing cross-cutting issues – and learned about other groups' proposals. They reviewed written proposals on other themes and suggested and adopted amendments asynchronously through online voting before the final session. In Climate Assembly UK, only the members who worked on specific workstreams voted on the recommendations in those areas.

If subgroups are created, the assembly flow can be designed to help members understand the context and proposals of other groups in one or more of the following ways:

- Members are separated into groups to dive into their subtopic and have space before final voting or evaluation to present their proposed outputs to other assembly members. Other members can be given the opportunity to offer amendments to the working group's proposals.
- Members are able to visit other groups during the deliberations, to cross-pollinate ideas and gain insights into the key issues being discussed.
- Members rotate to new topics, or most members rotate groups while some stay in their groups to anchor their original topic and provide continuity.
- Members have access to others' proposals and can collaborate in shared documents to make and vote on amendments.

Having a realistic understanding of how long it will take members to deliver against the remit will permit commissioners to make an informed decision about how and whether to split the members into groups: the facilitation and design team can help assess the time required for groups to move through the learning, deliberation and drafting phases. Particularly if the members are divided into static groups, the team needs to build in time for members to learn about other topics and proposals. This can be achieved by allowing members to visit other groups, by allotting time for one group's members to explain their proposals thoroughly to the others and invite suggestions for improvement, and/or through collaborative work on shared documents in order for the final consensus or voting process to be meaningful.