

DEMOCRACY BEYOND ELECTIONS

A Handbook on Citizens' Assemblies

2nd Edition



newDEMOCRACY

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European Commission (2024).
Courtesy of Lenka Thérová.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The path for the use of Citizens’ Juries and Citizens’ Assemblies was first laid by Ned Crosby and Pat Benn in the United States, with nearly identical timing to the work of Peter Dienel in Germany in the mid-1970s. Every field needs pioneers, and the authors note their foundational contributions.

Our field is similarly indebted to those who created the British Columbia Citizens’ Assembly (2004), which in turn inspired transformative work in Ireland (2011 onwards) with contributions from academia, civil society, the public service, and elected representatives. Without these two major developments, there would be little interest in this Handbook.

The newDemocracy Foundation would like to thank the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) and United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) for taking a leadership role and helping to champion a focus on innovation. Most commentary on democracy focuses on the negative. We would do better to focus on the opportunity.

Significant thanks are given to the practitioners around the world who are delivering the practical work to design, operate, and evaluate deliberative innovations which make our democracies stronger. Their contributions make this handbook possible, and the diversity of local adaptations expands the thinking of everyone in the field.

A NOTE ABOUT READING THIS HANDBOOK

Each chapter has a specific intended audience. While we hope everyone has the time and interest to read cover to cover, everyone should start with the introduction, followed by the sections of particular interest.

“A democracy that excludes is no democracy at all.”

António Guterres
SECRETARY-GENERAL
OF THE UNITED NATIONS

INTERNATIONAL DAY OF
DEMOCRACY, 2025

PREFACE

This updated edition of *Democracy Beyond Elections: A Handbook on Citizens' Assemblies* documents emerging approaches and experiences related to deliberative forms of public participation.

The first edition of the handbook was developed as part of a project supported by the United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) that examined innovative models of citizen engagement. Through the preparation of practical materials and the implementation of demonstration initiatives in Brazil, Malawi, and North Macedonia, the project explored the use of citizens' assemblies as one approach to facilitating public participation in decision-making processes.

Since then, deliberative democratic practices have attracted growing interest in a range of contexts. Governments, civil society organizations, academic institutions, and other stakeholders have explored how such approaches may contribute to public dialogue and citizen engagement. During this period, UNDEF has continued to support initiatives aimed at encouraging civic participation and strengthening democratic processes.

This updated edition was prepared in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), which has worked with a variety of partners on citizen engagement and participatory governance initiatives in different settings.

The second edition reflects developments in the field since the publication of the original handbook and includes updated information and additional examples from a range of countries and contexts. It seeks to capture evolving practices and lessons emerging from the experience of practitioners and organizations working in this area.

The views and approaches presented in this handbook are those of the authors and contributors. The publication is intended as a reference resource for information and discussion and does not imply endorsement by UNDEF, the United Nations Office for Partnerships, UNDP, or the United Nations of any particular methodology, recommendation, or viewpoint contained herein.



Top and Bottom Right: UNDEF citizen participation projects in Colombia and Haiti

Bottom Left: Cabo Delgado (2026): One of three Citizens' Assemblies led by the Government of Mozambique to deliberate on how to allocate revenues from natural resource extraction to climate change resilience with a focus on women's priorities. Image: Fundação MASC (courtesy of Delibera Brasil).



TABLE OF CONTENTS

08 Introduction

14 Chapter 1:
FOUNDATIONS OF DELIBERATIVE
DEMOCRACY: BEGINNING
WITH THE BASICS

38 Chapter 2:
FOR POLITICIANS AND SENIOR
OFFICIALS: COMMISSIONING
CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

66 Chapter 3:
FOR SENIOR OFFICIALS:
PLANNING AND PREPARING

96 Chapter 4:
FOR PROJECT OWNERS:
KEY DESIGN DECISIONS

138 Chapter 5:
FOR PROJECT TEAMS:
DELIVERY AND OPERATIONS

166 Chapter 6:
FACILITATION

194 Chapter 7:
PARLIAMENTARY AND
INSTITUTIONAL MODELS

INTRODUCTION

“WE NEED TO MAKE OUR DEMOCRACIES MORE INCLUSIVE. THIS REQUIRES BOLD AND INNOVATIVE REFORMS TO BRING IN THE YOUNG, THE POOR AND MINORITIES INTO THE POLITICAL SYSTEM. AN INTERESTING IDEA PUT FORWARD...WOULD BE TO REINTRODUCE THE ANCIENT GREEK PRACTICE OF SELECTING...BY LOT.”

KOFI ANNAN, SECRETARY-GENERAL
OF THE UNITED NATIONS, 1997 -2006,
NEW YORK TIMES ATHENS DEMOCRACY FORUM,
OCTOBER 2017



The call for more inclusive, trusted, and representative decision making is not new, but it is increasingly urgent. Around the world, public institutions and the communities they serve are looking for better ways to understand complex problems, manage disagreement, and move beyond highly polarised or low information debates. This handbook has been developed to support that effort.

WHAT IS THIS HANDBOOK?

This handbook is a 'how-to' guide for commissioning, designing, and operating citizens' assemblies to achieve a more informed, substantive, and representative way to make trusted democratic decisions. While there are many ways to consult the community, the focus of this handbook is on deliberative approaches, of which the citizens' assembly is the best-known model.

Citizens' assemblies combine civic lottery (also known as sortition or selection by lot) with deliberation to bring a diverse group of people across ages, genders, locations, and perspectives together in an environment where they learn, think, discuss, and work toward finding common ground to address a given problem. An assembly aims to provide commissioning authorities with a set of recommendations that assembly members have agreed to, supported by their reasoning and evidence.

This handbook walks you through each step of the journey: identifying when a deliberative approach is appropriate, designing the key features of a process, preparing and running the assembly itself, and understanding how to translate recommendations into action.

This handbook builds on the original handbook developed through an UNDEF-supported project that also funded three demonstration projects in Brazil, the Republic of Malawi, and the Republic of North Macedonia, designed to illustrate how deliberative processes can be implemented in diverse contexts and to strengthen public understanding of their practical application. The assemblies addressed three distinct, locally grounded issues: urban waste management in Fortaleza, Brazil; oversight and use of Constituency Development Funds (CDF) in Malawi; and public understanding and responses to the Covid 19 pandemic, in the Republic of North Macedonia. Some of these examples, which illustrate how deliberative processes can be adapted to a range of social and institutional contexts, appear as case studies on p.31 and 102 and will be referenced throughout the handbook to help readers see how the principles set out here have been applied in practice.

THE HANDBOOK IS WRITTEN WITH FOUR KEY AUDIENCES IN MIND:

01

You are an elected official or another kind of decision-maker.

You might feel pressured by public opinion, making it hard to take complex decisions with difficult trade-offs, resulting in these decisions being watered down or not taken at all. There may be social media campaigns which oversimplify issues, often with powerful special interests claiming to speak for the public dominating the debate. You face decisions where all courses of action will earn criticism and where public support from everyday people is unusual.

02

You are in the public administration.

You may have been tasked with running a citizens' assembly and need to understand how to commission, design, plan and operate a process. You may have only been asked to consult the community, and you know you need to do something different from what you would usually do. Someone in a political role may have said, *"Here, read this Handbook!"*

03

You are a facilitator or engagement practitioner.

You may have never run a deliberative process before and want specific guidance on how to deliver these formats, or you may want to better understand process design principles or see examples of different kinds of practice from all over the world.

04

You are an advocate.

You may be seeking a new way to get through a political deadlock. A process like this won't necessarily deliver the result you're hoping for, but you would prefer to trust everyday people over political stalemates. You may choose to ask governments for a process rather than a policy. Your government may have announced that they're running a citizens' assembly, and you want to know how to evaluate it properly.



The participants of the Citizens' Assembly on Nutrition in Transition put their ballots in a box - Germany (2023) © Deutscher Bundestag / Robert Boden / Mehr Demokratie

HOW TO USE THIS HANDBOOK

The handbook is written sequentially. Everyone should start with Chapter 1, which provides conceptual grounding for what deliberation is, when it is useful, and the principles that guide high-quality design.

The subsequent chapters guide practitioners through the steps and decisions that need to be made when running a citizens' assembly. It starts with the first step: selecting a topic that is well suited to this type of approach. It will then cover the major components of design, preparation, planning and facilitation – all aimed at helping groups reach informed, common-ground decisions.

This handbook details the critical aspects of practical project design and delivery. Unlike an election, which is fairly standardised and repeatable regardless of size or population and local context, these projects are designed to match the depth and complexity of the relevant decision. They vary each time and can look quite different from context to context. For this reason, it is important that organisers have a working understanding of the principles behind each aspect (summarised on pages 54-55).

If you accept and agree with the principles, then the specifics, variations, and inclusions in differing contexts become easy to apply. While the principles may seem obvious, very few government engagements apply them today. Engagements of any scale built on deliberative principles will see a change in citizen satisfaction.

WHAT'S INSIDE

You will find:

- Practical guidance on commissioning and designing a citizens' assembly
- Explanations of deliberation and the principles behind it
- Steps for preparing and running a project, from recruitment to facilitation
- Examples and case studies from around the world
- Insights on how deliberation connects to other engagement approaches

People want to have a say in decisions that matter to them. They want to be heard and feel heard by having direct influence on policy decisions.



Mongolia is the first country in the world to mandate citizens be consulted using deliberative polling before parliament can consider any constitutional amendments.



Malawi: Men and women deliberated together on how funds should be spent in the Salima District (2022).

Chapter 01

FOUNDATIONS OF DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY: BEGINNING WITH THE BASICS

Democracy is about communities making their own decisions. Voting for representatives and proposals is one mechanism, but we start from the position that we need to do more.

WHAT IS DELIBERATION?

Public deliberation is an approach to politics where everyday citizens, not just experts or politicians, are deeply involved in community problem-solving and public decision-making. Making community engagement more deliberative means moving it away from adversarial or combative approaches toward discussion and understanding to find common ground.

Deliberation is about thinking through issues carefully and engaging in open discussion to find shared solutions. Unlike approaches that simply count preferences to identify a majority view, deliberative methods encourage participants to listen, reflect, and where warranted, revise their opinions. They rely on inclusive participation, mutual respect, reasoned arguments, and a focus on the public good.

Evidence shows that deliberation can be a powerful way of shifting conversations from confrontation to collaboration.

This handbook focuses on deliberative processes but also shows how deliberative principles can strengthen other community engagement formats, such as surveys, fact sheets, online discussions, town hall meetings, and more. We speak about principles, not a single model. No one type of deliberation is a purer form of deliberative democracy.

In practice, a deliberative mini-public might be called a citizens' jury, a citizens' assembly, a collaboration hub, an *observatorio*, a community solutions panel, or a people's panel. This handbook predominantly uses the term 'citizens' assembly,' but these terms are to some extent interchangeable. Each naming style has its purpose (assembly conveys a larger scale gathering than a jury), but what is important to understand is that these different styles are all variations of the same core idea. The handbook focuses on the particular practice of citizens' assemblies because it's challenging to get it right.

This handbook is meant to help those who want to understand how to take that first step toward delivering a well-designed deliberative project.

Throughout this book, we won't tell you what to do: the emphasis is on posing questions so you can design with your local context in mind.

No single project or process is a golden key that lets any community make perfectly trusted local decisions. But there are a small number of fundamental principles that are repeated in each project. These principles are essential to shifting how public decision-making is made, away from public opinion and toward considered public judgment.

HISTORY OF DELIBERATION ACROSS CULTURES

Deliberative processes—ways in which communities come together to reason, discuss, and make collective decisions—long predate modern democratic institutions such as parliaments, juries, or Citizens' Assemblies. While the term "deliberative democracy" is a recent invention coined by American scholar Joseph Bessette in 1980, participatory decision-making has deep historical roots in many parts of the world. Across cultures, regions and historical periods, societies have recognised dialogue, inclusiveness, and consensus as essential tools for resolving conflict, maintaining justice, and shaping shared futures.

For example, in classical Athens around the fifth century BC, public deliberation was central to political life, with citizens participating directly in assemblies, councils, and popular courts, supported by mechanisms such as rotation in office and sortition to limit elite dominance.

In Asia, deliberation has deep historical roots in political and religious traditions. In ancient India, clan-based republics such as the *Licchavis* governed through assemblies that debated and decided policy collectively, and the Buddhist Sangha established formal procedures for debate, consensus, and voting, creating one of the earliest rule-bound deliberative communities. In imperial China, Confucian thought promoted moral persuasion and remonstrance through court deliberations and scholarly academies. In other parts of Asia, local councils—including Indian panchayats, Indonesian *musyawarah*, Philippine barangay assemblies, and Afghan jirgas—relied on collective discussion to govern and resolve disputes. Islamic traditions further reinforced consultation through the principle of shura. Though often hierarchical and limited in participation, these practices embedded consensus-seeking and public reasoning deeply into Asian political life.

Across the Arabian Peninsula and the Levant, tribal councils known as majlis functioned as open forums where community members gathered to debate disputes, alliances, and collective concerns. Leaders were expected to persuade and mediate rather than rule unilaterally, grounding authority in consensus and reputation. Under the Ottoman Empire, religious communities organized through the millet system governed many internal affairs via councils that deliberated on legal, educational, and welfare matters. In major cities, merchant guilds and scholarly circles also practiced structured debate, reinforcing traditions of consultative decision-making within hierarchical systems.

In many African societies, deliberation developed through communal Indigenous practices often described as palaver traditions, where open dialogue, storytelling, and consensus-building in public gatherings formed the basis of conflict resolution and collective decision-making. In Botswana specifically, deliberative principles are identifiable in the traditional kgotla system, a village-level assembly that has existed for thousands of years, whereby citizens meet regularly to discuss public matters and hold officials accountable. This traditional participatory forum, still in existence today, complements the country’s modern Westminster parliamentary democracy by allowing public input on local and national issues.

In the Pacific region, ‘*talanoa*’ is a word originating from Indigenous Pasifika cultures (across Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa) to refer to an open, informal, and inclusive process of dialogue where people share stories, experiences, and ideas in a respectful and honest way. Talanoa is centered on story-telling rather than confrontation, relationship-building, inclusive participation, consensus and understanding between people. It is commonly used in community meetings and in conflict resolution. Talanoa was recognised as global best practice when it was adopted by the UN to aid COP climate negotiations in 2017-18. The so-called ‘Talanoa Dialogue’ helped motivate countries to increase their climate ambitions and stimulated a wealth of ideas on how to do it.

In recent decades, Latin America has become a global laboratory for deliberative democracy, drawing on Indigenous knowledge. Indigenous Latin communities have long practised forms of collective decision-making under customary systems known as *usos y costumbres* — literally “customs and traditions.” In Mexico, Guatemala, Bolivia, Ecuador and elsewhere, major decisions are made in open assemblies, leaders are selected through deliberation rather than party machines, and civic responsibility is widely shared.

While these historical examples should not be understood as fully inclusive by contemporary democratic standards – in many cases, deliberative participation was limited to men and excluded significant portions of the population—it demonstrates that collective decision-making is not a recent invention or the product of any single culture, but rather, of a shared human tradition.

Together, these examples show that deliberative democracy is both ancient and resilient—deeply rooted in cultural practice yet capable of renewal.

As global institutions such as the United Nations promote more inclusive and participatory governance, these traditions—and others—offer important lessons. They remind us that meaningful participation is not an ideal to be invented, but a shared heritage to be revitalised—one that continues to inform how we collectively make decisions today.

UNDERSTANDING THE FUNDAMENTALS

While the political logic is covered in Chapter 2, all the technical questions on designing and delivering a project are answered in

A DELIBERATIVE PROCESS (CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLIES OR SIMILAR) REVOLVES AROUND A NUMBER OF KEY PRINCIPLES:

- Representative of the population, generally by using a democratic lottery.
- Information-rich through a diversity of sources.
- Time is aligned to the complexity of the issue, which results in some quite extended formats.
- Open question and free responses ensure that the citizen voice isn’t filtered by having only a limited pool of options.
- Authority is outlined at the outset: letting citizens know their recommendations will be public, who will give them a substantive answer, and the timeframe. This is important as it provides the incentive for citizens to commit the time to work together.
- “Dialogue not debate” creates the environment for discussion, reason giving, and mutual understanding that is the basis for finding common ground.



CASE STUDY

FEDERAL DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ETHIOPIA

GADAA DELIBERATION— A CULTURE OF DELIBERATION

Overview: The Gadaa System is an ancient, egalitarian form of governance among the Oromo people of Ethiopia. It is built on three interrelated pillars: the culture of public deliberation (Gumii/Yaa’aa), a merit-based electoral process (lallaba) for appointing leaders (Adulaa), and a customary law-based judiciary known as Mana Murtii Aadaa.

Central to the system is the Gumii/Yaa’aa, an inclusive assembly where individuals participate in open deliberation. Deliberation is deeply embedded in Oromo cultural practice with Oromo children taught how to deliberate from a very young age. Deliberative gatherings are held across Oromia, with the most notable being Gumii Gaayoo in the Borana Zone and Mi’ee Bokku in the Guji Zone. A typical session begins with prayers under the sacred Dhaddacha tree, and a reminder to participants to “put all clever talk aside,” after which discussions are allowed to unfold. Complex issues often demand days of careful debate before resolution.

The Gumii Gaayoo carries four essential responsibilities: establishing legal frameworks, settling disputes unresolved at lower levels, appointing Gadaa leaders, and promoting peaceful coexistence among communities. Matters brought forward are first examined by councils of elders, who formulate a position and present it through mediators for broader discussion.

Decision-making in the Gadaa System relies on consensus reached through extensive public debate. Women’s voices are given special weight and silencing them results in dismissal from proceedings. Dissenters are respected, granted full space to argue, and persuaded only through genuine deliberation.

Source: [Salale University, Ethiopia. \(PDF\) Beyond the Canon of Liberal Democracy: A Lesson from Gadaa for Consensual Democracy](#)

Chapter 4: you can get answers there on *how much, how long, and how hard*.

‘Deliberative democracy’ is a phrase you’ll hear from time to time, and it means something different to every person who hears it. At its simplest, picture this: **Equal share of voice and equal access to information.**

We achieve the ‘equal voice’ through lottery selection with the aspiration that anyone in the community can look at a project and see someone they can relate to. We also achieve it in the room through small group conversations (tables of 5-6) and facilitation.

We achieve equal access to information by ensuring a broad range of perspectives on an issue are included in oversight groups (refer to section 4.5) and by giving citizens ample time

If you have a representative mix of people, and consider a breadth of information, you are on the right track to citizen deliberation. Note that parliamentary committees are very deliberative in nature (breadth of information and deep consideration), but they are not a citizens’ deliberative format.

WHICH MODEL SHOULD WE USE?

This handbook is constructed around a set of principles. We do this because country contexts and cultures vary considerably, and a focus on principles provides a simple baseline from which people can tailor these projects.

Looking at these principles, it becomes clear that many existing consultation approaches can be made more deliberative. For example, you can incorporate a randomly selected group of citizens into, or alongside, your regular stakeholder engagement processes. You can broaden the range of information and perspectives available in online engagement activities, perhaps by allowing participants to submit questions and suggest trusted sources. You can also reconsider how questions are framed. Ultimately, deliberative engagement involves a shift in mindset: moving away from a model of “selling and defending” a preferred solution and towards one of sharing decision-making with the community.

THERE ARE FOUR STARTING POINTS TO THINK ABOUT:

01

Add a citizens' jury to online engagement processes.

A small group of randomly selected community members can review the contributions received through an online engagement and identify the issues, concerns, or ideas that decision-makers should respond to. Because these judgements are made by everyday people rather than government officials, the process is often seen as more transparent and impartial by the wider community. This type of prioritization exercise is also relatively simple and low-cost to implement.

02

Shrink the task to fit the time.

Asking people an open question for recommendations on a complex issue takes a lot of time. Changing the task to being: *"What one idea do you want your Member of Parliament (MP) to explore in response to this issue?"* is a dramatically simpler task. Instead of evaluating all possible options, they are simply being asked to find one idea they think is worth deeper exploration. This is a good way to do a single-day deliberation.

03

Consider a Deliberative Poll as a mass individualized form of involving citizens.

Where a citizens' assembly asks citizens to find agreement as a group (which, as you can imagine, takes a lot of time), a Deliberative Poll measures changes in individual citizen views as you add information. This means decision-makers can learn a lot from a 1–2-day project and also allows for greater scale in participant numbers. You can run a 500-person Deliberative Poll with fewer resources than a 50-person citizens' assembly.

04

The citizens' assembly.

This model is most appropriate when the support of everyday people for the final recommendations is itself a valuable political asset. The legitimacy of the process comes from decision-makers being able to point to a representative group of citizens who have carefully considered the evidence and reached informed conclusions. The citizens' assembly will be the primary focus of this handbook.



CASE STUDY

MONGOLIA

LAW ON DELIBERATIVE POLLING

Overview: In 2017, following a 2015 city-wide Deliberative Poll for the Capital City Ulaanbataar, the national Parliament in Mongolia passed a "Law on Deliberative Polling." The law requires the use of Deliberative Polling to discuss potential amendments to the Mongolian Constitution before Parliament considers proposed amendments, funds certain local projects, or plans some public spaces.

Deliberative Polling has been used twice to amend the Constitution of Mongolia following Deliberative Polls in 2017 and 2023. The 2017 Deliberative Poll discussed six possible constitutional amendments.

As a result, a constitutional amendment was passed that limits presidential powers, expands the Prime Minister's power to independently appoint the cabinet, and allows the cabinet to define the budget, among other changes.

The 2023 Deliberative Poll focused on civilian and political rights and responsibilities, parliamentary democracy, the economy, sovereign wealth funds, decentralisation, and social problems. In 2023, an amendment increased the size of the Parliament and adopted a mixed electoral system.

"My personal reflection is that the thoughtful opinions shared by citizens during the deliberative polling were fundamental to the constitutional revision process. Indeed, we made citizen participation and listening a fundamental part of the amendment process, and we used a range of consultative mechanisms. Parliamentarians had hearings and meetings with citizens around the country, and we received tens of thousands of comments and suggestions. Compared with all the other consultation mechanisms used, the

deliberative polling produced the most informed and carefully considered opinions, while also providing a vast amount of data.... The deliberative polling acted as a focus group with a sample that represented all Mongolians, and was very much instructive for myself and other leading actors who carried the amendment process forward." – Zandanshatar Gombojav, Chairman of the State Great Hural (Parliament) of Mongolia.

The Result: Since 2023, UNDP has piloted the country's first rural deliberative poll in Tumentsogt soum (district) as part of the Promoting Participation Pathways for Development Initiative. The pilot enabled citizens to openly discuss local issues, helping to rebuild trust by ensuring that their concerns were carefully documented and reflected in local decision making.

Contact: [Stanford Deliberative Democracy Lab; https://deliberation.stanford.edu](https://deliberation.stanford.edu)



QUICK REFERENCE FOR UNITED NATIONS OFFICES AND STAFF

Different parts of the UN system have been developing a strong interest in deliberative democracy as a powerful way to promote more effective, inclusive and accountable public governance.

UNDP's 2023 Human Development Report "Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World" ¹ notes that integrating deliberative standards into citizen engagement processes can overcome polarization and help elaborate high-quality public input, stressing that "there seems to be great merit in continuing to explore this field."

On a similar note, the 2025 Development at Risk Report² includes deliberative processes as a key element of a reimagined governance, which invests in adaptive, participatory, and risk-averse systems that strengthen trust and social capital.

This section is offered as a quick reference for UN colleagues exploring options to implement deliberative democracy projects on the ground.

The United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) promotes citizen participation in democratic processes, including through highlighting and supporting citizens' assemblies as effective tools for inclusive, community driven decision making. The Fund supported demonstration projects in Brazil, Malawi, and North Macedonia to show how these deliberative processes can be successfully implemented in diverse contexts and to build broader understanding of their practical application. Beyond these demonstrations, UNDEF has also advanced global efforts in this area by supporting practical guidance, including resources such as this handbook, and funding additional initiatives that help civil society and governments incorporate participatory, deliberation based practices into policymaking systems worldwide.

The demonstration projects originally commissioned by UNDEF showed that it is easier than you may think to get started in a

¹ UNDP Breaking the Gridlock: Reimagining Cooperation in a Polarized World

² UNDP Development at Risk: Protecting the Gains and Unleashing Opportunities Amid Crisis

wide variety of country contexts. The project practitioners in Malawi, North Macedonia and Brazil were all undertaking their first projects, just as your partners could be.

Link 1: <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-reportdocument/hdr2023-24reporten.pdf>

Link 2: <https://www.undp.org/publications/development-risk-protecting-gains-andunleashing-opportunities-amid-crisis>

GETTING STARTED

Don't do it alone.

In many successful deliberative initiatives, whether within parliaments or other public institutions, a dedicated working group is often convened to ensure that staff have access to the expertise needed to design and support the process effectively.

If you think this would be helpful, then a simple first point to ask for help is the Democracy R&D Network, which has member practitioners in 58 countries and includes people handling almost every case study project in this handbook.

Contact: <https://democracyrd.org>

United Nations Country Offices should contact the Global Lead for the UNDP's Open and Inclusive Public Sphere as a first step.

Contact: <https://www.undp.org/governance/open-and-inclusive-public-sphere>

Identify and assist a practitioner partner

This will be your go-to organisation for design and operations. Having this local capability on hand is an essential foundational step.

A 'good fit' first-time partner will have experience facilitating groups within the community, while not being a single-issue interest group, or one known to have a fixed political position.

This partner could be gathering different groups of stakeholders together, or running day-long workshops.

The demonstration project, in North Macedonia utilised one-week intensive training for these ‘first-time’ organisations. Engaging this partners early is important for the approach to government. Every case study in this book includes source information where you can seek contact details for people willing to help.

WORKSHOPS BRING PEOPLE ON THE JOURNEY.

In our experience, a novel democratic idea is best learned about in group formats. An individual Member of Parliament (MP) or Mayor may be persuaded that this is useful, but it can be challenging for them to explain to colleagues something quite different from “politics as usual.” Briefings for multiple representatives within a party, or – even better – cross-party groups within a parliament, have been the best way to see this approach get traction.

The Federation for Innovation in Democracy (FIDE) in Belgium developed a novel workshop format, The Autumn School on Citizens’ Assemblies, which encourages MPs to come with a policy issue they want to solve and hear case studies from other parliaments. The MPs then apply what they’ve learned to their issue. These have been attended by parliamentarians across the world.

“The Autumn School on Citizens’ Assemblies was one of the most valuable learning experiences in my professional career. The knowledge and practical insights I gained there proved essential for preparing and organizing Sarajevo’s first Citizens’ Assembly. It gave me both the confidence and the concrete tools to adapt global best practices to our local context, ensuring that the process was meaningful, inclusive, and well-structured.”

— Nermina Suljević, Assistant Mayor for Sustainable Development, City of Sarajevo

Contact: Federation for Innovation in Democracy – Europe;
fidemocracy.org

USE THIS HANDBOOK.

This handbook has been written to be used and reused, shared, and importantly, to be broken apart. This handbook has everything in one place, but if you want material purely for a political audience, consider translating just Chapter 2 and provide a readable 20-page summary of the political logic.

You’ll also find it useful to refer to the UNDP’s Practitioners’ Notes on Deliberative Democracy [UNDP, Innovative Governance Programming Breaking Gridlock], which has several concise summaries and global case studies.

SELECTING YOUR APPROACH

There are strengths and weaknesses to different engagement approaches. Different approaches are suited to different kinds of problems. Democratic societies can face many challenges. Citizens’ Assemblies can assist with:

- **Resource allocation and distributive justice:** Allocating costs and benefits fairly across society.
- **Managing pluralism and diversity:** Accommodating multiple ethnic, religious, and cultural groups while maintaining cohesion.
- **Corruption and rent-seeking:** Preventing private interests from hijacking public institutions.
- **Collective action problems:** Overcoming situations where individual choices lead to collective harm.
- **Short-term incentives versus long-term planning:** Overcoming political pressures for immediate gains at the expense of future needs.
- **Information asymmetries and misinformation:** Ensuring accurate information while combating disinformation.
- **Intergenerational equity:** Balancing current needs with obligations to future generations.
- **Institutional decay and reform:** Updating outdated structures while maintaining stability.
- **Ethical and moral dilemmas:** Navigating conflicts between competing moral principles.

- **Political polarisation and tribalism:** Managing ideological divisions that threaten democratic norms.
- **Technocratic versus democratic decision-making:** Integrating expertise with popular participation.
- **Electoral system design:** Choosing voting systems that balance competing democratic goals.
- **Path dependency and reform resistance:** Overcoming entrenched interests blocking necessary change.
- **Legitimacy crises and trust deficits:** Rebuilding public confidence in government institutions.

Citizens' Assemblies are much less suitable for:

- **Foreign affairs and international cooperation dilemmas:** Balancing sovereignty with global needs.
- **Crisis management:** Maintaining democracy during emergencies.
- **Scale and subsidiarity tensions:** Deciding which issues belong at local versus national levels.
- **Political participation barriers:** Removing obstacles to full democratic participation.

Voting is a strong decision-making and participatory mechanism, but it can be based on low-information and create short-term incentives for political candidates that make it less ideal for managing long-term planning and intergenerational equity. Democracies function best when they make use of different mechanisms to take advantage of their strengths and weaknesses.

For example, we recommend that long-form deliberations are complemented with wide community engagement strategies that ensure many different people can be involved in varying levels of depth and commitment, including groups that don't normally have a say. As such, this is not a handbook documenting all public engagement strategies. There are many great resources available for community and public consultation and engagement – check the Appendix for a list of organisations and publications that cover this wider topic.

Instead, this handbook is a guide to delivering the large, extended time format citizens' assembly process.

THE COST QUESTION

We've included a budget template on page 95.

As a quick reference, any engagement project has costs: facilitation, recruitment (printing and staff to liaise to form the citizen group), participant costs (expenses and any thank you payment), venues, and catering.

For general guidance, the UNDEF demonstration projects in Malawi, North Macedonia, and Brazil using the citizens' assembly option all operated a 5-6 day, ~40 participant (lottery-selected), multiple facilitator project for US\$40,000-\$50,000. Other models outlined above will range from zero cost to ~60% of this figure.

A 6-day Citizens' Assembly project is at the upper end of quality and impact – people will have been able to deeply explore a policy problem. As a general rule, if the project runs less than 4 days, a different format should be used.

ADAPTATIONS & LOCALISATION

Another common question is how a citizens' assembly could work here, where "here" can involve some different social norms or operating constraints. Chapter 3 should be your starting point, as the handbook is not about a single model but about a set of principles.

This handbook contains over 35 case studies. In sharing these, we are trying to highlight the localisation elements. We hope you will see challenges and contexts similar to your own, and if so, get in touch with the organization listed to learn more.

ASSESSING CONTEXTS

We are careful to note this is not the 'silver bullet' handbook, and no process works in all contexts. When considering whether a citizens' assembly is appropriate, it is essential to determine whether the core principle of equal voice can genuinely be upheld. In other words, can you mix men and women, old and young, people from a wide range of social and demographic groups and be confident that these differences won't be a barrier to listening? Or getting people in the room in the first place?

Citizens' assemblies work where the informed, common-ground voice of everyday people is a trusted source. If that statement doesn't apply, then a different approach is likely needed.

HOW DO CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES INTEGRATE WITH THE CIVIC TECHNOLOGIES WE USE?

Integration is easy because citizens' assemblies and civic technologies are highly complementary. In fact, assemblies often become more effective when they are informed by other forms of public participation.

Online engagement platforms, surveys, digital consultations, and town hall meetings can reach large numbers of people, providing valuable insight into community values, priorities, questions and concerns. These processes can help identify the issues that matter most to the public and ensure that a wide range of perspectives are placed on the agenda.

A citizens' assembly can then build on this foundation by examining those issues in depth. Participants can test ideas, consider evidence, explore trade-offs, and develop informed recommendations.

In this way, different forms of civic technology can support different stages of public participation. Some tools excel at scale, helping governments hear from large numbers of people. Others are specifically designed to support deliberation, enabling participants to engage more deeply with competing perspectives, identify areas of agreement and develop collective judgement. These tools can complement citizens' assemblies by broadening participation before, during or after the assembly process.

For readers seeking more detailed guidance on **digital participation platforms**^{*}, including deliberative technologies, AI-enabled participation tools, implementation considerations and platform selection, the Digital Participation Platforms Guide (2025 Edition) published by UNDP and People Powered is a valuable companion resource. The guide covers more than 80 platforms and includes practical advice on designing inclusive, transparent and effective digital participation processes.

^{*} Link: www.undp.org/publications/guide-digital-participation-platforms-2025



CASE STUDY

REPUBLIC OF MALAWI

MALAWI'S FIRST CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

Overview: Malawi's first Citizens' Assembly was supported by five Members of Parliament (MPs) from the national government were seeking to improve public trust in the use of Constituency Development Funds (CDF). The general public sentiment was that politicians used these funds for personal and electoral gain, the result of many news stories feeding a negative public view. The MPs commissioning the project saw the appeal in 'opening the books' to a randomly selected group of citizens who were able to meet, visit project sites, and consider the value of funds spent in the Salima District.

The Project: The Assembly localised two deliberative principles extensively: representative random recruitment and information provision. Malawi does not have a universal database of addresses which is a common starting point for lottery selection. Instead, the organiser, Edwin Msewa, set up a simple system to engage people on market days, when a large cross-section of the population together to sell and trade produce. In this environment, people were handed coloured paper through the morning, and a young child was chosen to pull sticks that had been dipped in a matching colour of paint from a bucket: if your paper matched the stick selected at random, then you were in the final draw for selection. What we see in this is a low-cost but transparently fair way to achieve lottery selection.

It is also worth noting that in a society with some traditional values around the role of women in society, the organiser was able to explain that the process relied on having an equal mix of men and women involved, so an invitation to a woman in a household was intended for her and not for the elder male in the house.

The Results: Because participants are selected by lottery, the process is transparently seen as fair and difficult to manipulate. Local media covering the assembly embraced the novelty of people speaking about a program who were a long way from being "official spokespeople".

"I wish the Citizens' Assembly initiative came in this country way back in the 1990s when we embraced the issue of democracy. Then we should have been moving together with the citizens now."—Enock Phale, MP for Salima Northwest and the Deputy Minister for Health, 2022.

Source: europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/authors/edwin-msewa/



CASE STUDY

COLOMBIA, BOGOTÁ

A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY TO DESIGN FUTURE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

Overview: In Bogotá, Colombia's capital, citizen participation is considered an important pillar of decision-making.

To inform the city's deliberative processes, the District Planning Secretariat of the Mayor's Office hosted a "meta-deliberative assembly," the first of its kind globally. Unlike typical citizens' assemblies that deliberate on substantive issues, this assembly focused on procedural matters, specifically, how to design future citizens' assemblies.

The Project: The assembly was composed of 34 women and 26 men, representing all 20 boroughs in the city. Age distribution included 20 young people, 30 adults, and 10 elders. Socio-economically, 30% of the participants were from low-income backgrounds, 10% from high-income backgrounds, and 50% from middle-income groups. To form the assembly, 51,000 citizens were initially contacted, with more than 2,000 expressing interest in participating. Outreach efforts included 11,000 phone calls, public registration sites set up in the city's 20 boroughs, and 40,000 WhatsApp text messages.

The Results: The Bogotá Meta-Deliberative Assembly made several recommendations, ranging from regulating the use of time in future deliberations to establishing methods for replacing members in case of vacancies. Additionally, the assembly set criteria for selecting future deliberation topics and clarified the roles of various stakeholders, including civil society and experts, in future citizens' assemblies.

"In the Planning Secretariat, we do not plan the city alone from a desk-- we also do it with the citizens."— Juan Carlos Prieto, Head of the Office of City Participation and Dialogue of the District Planning Secretariat, Bogotá.

Source: Extitudo De Política Abierta; www.extitudo.org

WHERE SHOULD WE START?

Counterintuitively, you should start with your hardest problem, not your easiest. People engage with problems that are relevant to their lives, and that's what hard problems tend to be.

- 1. Perceptions Of Corruption:** A 'jury' of people from all walks of life, given the time to look closely at public expenditures, is very simple to operate and has a high level of impact (See, Malawi Case Study on page 31)
- 2. Long-term wicked/complex problems:** The greater the complexity, the better the fit. Citizens' assemblies offer extended time, thus allowing people to understand that there is no easy answer. Issues such as balancing a budget, choosing which infrastructure to prioritise, or allocating health funding often fall into the category of problems the public expects government to "just fix," even though the underlying trade-offs are far more complex than they appear. Citizens' assemblies work well in these areas because they allow participants to become immersed in the problem, understand the constraints, and grapple with the difficult choices involved.
- 3. Highly polarised scenarios:** The deeper the divide, the more valuable the deliberative approach. Structured citizen forums and mixed-identity dialogue bodies, when grounded in deliberative norms, allow participants to engage meaningfully across entrenched positions. These processes foster recognition, understanding, and shared learning, often resulting in viable "working arrangements" even in deeply divided societies. Evidence shows that like-minded partisans tend to moderate their views through such dialogue, revealing common ground where polarization once prevailed.

HOW DO WE WORK WITH CIVIL SOCIETY VS GOVERNMENTS?

Government public institutions (national, state, and local) are the preferred commissioning entity for a citizens' assembly. This way, there is a clear and understandable path to a decision-maker.

We understand NGOs will often take an interest, so some useful prompts for your thinking are:

- 1. Will the wider community trust this organisation as impartial, or do they have a view on the issue being discussed?** For example, a climate advocate should not run a climate assembly. Suggest to them that partnering with an organisation with a different view to jointly sponsor a project will likely make for a more publicly trusted result.
- 2. What are they able to do with recommendations?** If a group of NGOs with varying perspectives have access to government decision-makers, then there's potential for a commitment being made to citizens that is meaningful.

It's important to note that projects operated by people with a clear perspective on an issue, who present 'one side' (perspective) of an argument, or who have no path to a decision-maker, are pursuing advocacy. There's plenty of space for advocacy in a democracy! But citizens' assemblies are intended as a deliberative process that brings together a cross section of the public to consider all sides of an issue, rather than an opportunity to advocate for a particular position.



CASE STUDY

UKRAINE, ZVIAHEL AND SLAVUTYCH

CITIZENS TACKLE MOBILITY AND WASTE MANAGEMENT IN UKRAINE

Overview: Amid the ongoing war, Ukraine has shown that participatory and deliberative democracy tools are essential for sustaining democratic resilience, fostering transparency, and rebuilding trust in the absence of regular elections, with assemblies held in the communities of Zviahel and Slavutych.

The Project: In Zviahel, the community struggled with limited opportunities for social interaction, culture, and well-being. The assembly brought together a representative group of citizens to address an acute shortage of modern, inclusive public spaces for all residents, including children, youth, seniors, veterans, and people with reduced mobility. The rising number of veterans with mobility issues made the gap even more urgent. Through the Citizens' Assembly, priorities were set, and multifunctional, accessible open spaces were co-designed to reflect local needs.

The Results: The response from local authorities to implement the recommendations was swift.

The City Council approved an Action Plan in December 2024; by early 2025, several measures were already in place, others in progress, and donor funding was sought for the rest.

In Slavutych, an outdated waste collection and landfill system threatened environmental safety and failed to meet Ukrainian and international standards. Without separate collection, recycling and reuse lagged, increasing landfill reliance. To address this, local self-government bodies are tasked with developing a comprehensive, cost-effective, and environmentally responsible waste management system. In response to the assembly, an Action Plan was drafted, bulky waste disposal costs for cottage housing were calculated, preparations for a waste morphology study were launched, and a pilot recycling project was planned for the Kyivskiy Quarter.

The assemblies helped shift local officials' perceptions of citizen engagement, promoting greater shared responsibility in decision-making. Local authorities of both municipalities have expressed a strong commitment to continue the use of citizens' assemblies in future.

The success of these early projects has laid the groundwork for more assemblies to be held in Ukraine.

"The Assembly participants gained a deep understanding of the issue, thanks to the experts who explained everything clearly and comprehensively. I was very impressed with both the organisation and the Assembly itself."
–Slavutych citizens assembly member, Ukraine.

"This approach is worth considering, especially given the absence of elections, the ongoing war, and the need for people to have a voice in shaping the country's agenda." –Natalia Chornogub, Lead Facilitator of the Zviahel Citizens' Assembly, Ukraine.

Contact: Council Of Europe Office in Kyiv. www.coe.int/ / FIDE, www.fidemocracy.org/



CASE STUDY

MEXICO, CHIHUAHUA

BUILDING DEMOCRACY WHILE FIGHTING CORRUPTION

Overview: In a national context marked by deep distrust in public institutions, Mexico's first deliberative democracy initiative took place in Chihuahua, one of the country's largest states and one greatly affected by corruption.

The Project: This initiative convened a Citizen Jury of 40 randomly selected residents, chosen through a civic lottery, to deliberate on a proposal for a State Anti-Corruption Policy. Organised by the State Anti-Corruption System, the process aimed to bring ordinary citizens into the heart of policy design on one of the country's most pressing issues.

Over sixteen structured sessions, the jury received support from independent experts and public officials, who provided information, answered questions, and simplified complex content to ensure accessibility. Central to the process was the "right to understand," a principle that emphasised pedagogical support and plain language to remove barriers to public engagement.

The Results: The outcome was a detailed proposal comprising 35 public policy actions targeting corruption as a systemic issue, with explicit focus on human rights and institutional integrity.

To safeguard the jury's work, an Observatory that included organisations such as the OECD and UNODC was established to monitor implementation and serve as a counterweight to government inaction.

Source: <https://iswe.org/>

WHAT NEXT?

We're here to help. You can email us questions, request project advice and have us make time for a training call over the internet.

Just email: newDemocracy Foundation;
contact@newdemocracy.com.au

We are able to connect you with experienced practitioners around the world, linking you to a global community of practice.



French president Emmanuel Macron delivers a speech during the Citizens' Convention for Climate held at the French 'Economic, Social and Environmental Council' (CESE) headquarters in Paris, on January 10, 2020. Photo by Stephane Lemouton/Pool/ABACAPRESS.COM

Chapter 02

FOR POLITICIANS AND SENIOR OFFICIALS: COMMISSIONING CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

“IN THE FACE OF DISINTEREST IN
PUBLIC AFFAIRS. I’M CONVINCED
THAT DELIBERATIVE AND
PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY
IS A WAY TO BRING THE PIECES
BACK TOGETHER.”

PRESIDENT OF FRANCE, EMANUEL MACRON.

WHY DO THIS?

There are many and varied critics of elected politicians saying they are “lacking conviction” or the leadership skills to make hard decisions. We aren’t among them.

THERE ARE MANY DIFFICULT CHALLENGES FACED BY LEADERS:

01

While *public opinion* has always been a factor that can influence how decision-makers and institutions make decisions and respond to public concerns, **social media has amplified its speed and intensity**. We all recognise how quickly an online reaction can build and how important it is for institutions to navigate that environment effectively. This section can provide practical guidance.

02

Non-participation by much of a community can be a starting point for unrest and dissatisfaction. You may want to involve people, but cynicism holds them back. Demonstrating their ability to have **a real connection to an informed decision**, and being heard in a process is essential to overcoming this.

03

Unequal power dynamics shape how different actors can participate in public life, and how special interests or advocacy groups often have greater capacity to make their views heard. These dynamics can be constructively balanced by ensuring that **the voices of everyday people**—from a wide range of backgrounds and life experiences—are also meaningfully included in the process.

04

The community can sometimes see opportunities and solutions that the government does not. Bureaucracies often work within established assumptions and constraints, which can limit the range of options considered. This is particularly true in under-resourced policy areas and amongst NGO-led projects facing implementation challenges. One of the key benefits of deliberative approaches is their ability to bring new perspectives and practical knowledge into the decision-making process.

Put another way, we need to move beyond citizens expecting leaders to “just fix it” towards a level of public understanding of why a policy decision is difficult and the trade-offs involved. When the public understands this, the nature of our politics changes.

05

Representation and transparency. Public debate can sometimes be shaped by those with the time, resources, or organisation to participate most actively. **A civic lottery adds another perspective by bringing together a representative group of everyday people selected through a transparent process.** This gives decision-makers access to informed public judgement that is independent of established interests and helps strengthen the transparency and legitimacy of decision-making.

Across these five challenges, the meaningful involvement of everyday people in a well-designed deliberative process is often the missing ingredient needed to build decisions that are both durable and widely trusted. When citizens are given the time, information, and support to consider complex issues, they can contribute thoughtful and informed judgements. This also gives elected leaders greater room to move. Participants who have worked through the evidence and trade-offs are often willing to publicly support the recommendations they have developed, sharing responsibility for difficult decisions rather than leaving elected leaders to carry the burden alone.



CASE STUDY

REPUBLIC OF KOREA

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON BUILDING NUCLEAR REACTORS

Overview: 2017 marked the first time in the Republic of Korea's democracy that a policy decision on a deeply divisive issue was made by the government through participatory citizen deliberation, marking a notable shift in the country's policymaking approach. The issue at stake was whether to permanently halt or resume the construction of two nuclear reactors (Shin-Gori Units 5 and 6) that were already 30% complete.

The newly elected Moon administration faced a challenging dilemma, made more complex by the need to balance its nuclear phase-out pledge with realities of ongoing projects and potential financial, legal, and political repercussions. Deep political and social divisions over the issue emerged. To break the deadlock and uphold public trust, the government adopted an innovative, citizen-engaged deliberation process to fairly gather public views and guide policy. Behind this was the government's calculation that to navigate a political crisis and policy dilemma safely, they needed to share the difficult choice with citizens, thus ensuring democratic legitimacy and greater credibility.

The Project: The deliberation took place during a highly sensitive period. It was the first year in office of the newly elected Moon administration. It was a time of transition and heightened public attention, requiring careful consideration and a balanced approach.

Participants were selected through stratified random sampling reflecting real opinion proportions: 35.5% in favour, 36.6% opposed, and 27.9% undecided. The process involved expert debates, online learning, and a three-day in-person deliberation. Public support shifted to 59.5% in favour of continuation and 40.5% opposed.

The Results: The political and policy outcomes of the Citizens' Assembly were significant. After a process of deliberation spanning 33 days, the 471 citizens who completed the process made a dual decision to continue the construction of Shin-Gori Units 5 and 6, but at the same time, to phase out nuclear energy in the long term. In other words, they showed sensitivity to short-term sunk costs by supporting the continuation of the project, while also endorsing energy transition from a long-term policy perspective. Based on the outcome of the deliberation, President Moon proceeded with the Assembly's decision—despite his initial pledge to halt construction—with political legitimacy grounded in the public's reasoned judgment.

Since the Shin-Gori deliberation, the Republic of Korea has entered into an era of more frequent deliberative processes, often state-led.

“Democracy relies on open debates and a collective commitment to decisions.” President Moon Jae'in's October 2017 statement, issued after the public deliberation on the Shin-Gori nuclear reactors No. 5 and 6.

Source: Jaeho Eun, Adjunct Professor, Kaist and President & CEO, Next Korea Advanced Institute of Science and Technology / www.kaist.ac.kr

THE DEMOCRACY CHALLENGE

The norms of political campaigning over the last 30 years have focused on control. Candidates often go to public appearances, which are carefully screened and filtered by advisors to control the message and shape what the electorate hears.

Being an elected representative has never been simple. Leaders are expected to make decisions on increasingly complex issues while responding to the needs, values, and concerns of the communities they serve.

Citizens cannot be expected to engage deeply with every policy question, yet they rightly expect decisions to reflect community priorities and values. The challenge for democratic leadership is to connect these public expectations with the realities and constraints of governing.

Deliberative processes help meet this challenge by creating opportunities for everyday people to engage more deeply with complex issues and contribute informed public judgement to the decision-making process.

Politicians who have effectively used citizens' assemblies and citizens' juries have often changed their view on the nature of their leadership. Rather than viewing leadership as 'selling' their solutions, they see their role as putting big decisions on the agenda, then leading a public discussion to hear many potential solutions before taking a final decision. Leadership starts with listening.

We think a key problem that needs addressing is that raw public opinion has too much power and influence in politics. We ask people what they think *before they have had time to think*, and the results take on a momentum of their own.

Many policy issues are hard to fix and will involve costs to reap benefits; some people will necessarily be made worse off. These people have a lot of incentive to complain, and public opinion can be quite easily swayed.

Groups with greater capacity to mobilise support, attract media attention, or fund advocacy efforts, can have a louder voice in public discussions and an oversized role in shaping public opinion. But this doesn't make the policy problems go away: if there were an easy answer, we assume someone would have

used it and the problem would be solved. So, how can governments overcome being easily influenced by agitated public opinion and avoid the constraints it imposes? As you can't ignore it, we suggest you find something better: public judgment.

In many countries, a criminal jury is used to resolve important questions that can sometimes result in people being jailed for the rest of their lives and the decision is widely trusted. While a trial jury does not give the reasoning or key evidence used to support their decision, a citizens' assembly does. When assemblies share this, governments have a mechanism to deliver substantively and meaningfully on an overused phrase: you create a genuine conversation with the community. If they have made an error of fact, you can retain good faith by correcting that point and explaining that in the context of your final decision.

Criminal juries are made up of everyday people, picked at random, and involved in hearing a range of evidence for several days or weeks. They discuss what they learned, what they trust, and what they don't, together as a group. If they can find common ground (sometimes unanimous, other times 11 out of 12), then a judgment is reached. That's public judgment.

You should note that *nowhere* is justice applied by asking for the raw public opinion of thousands of citizens through a two-minute polling exercise. If you were arrested, we're sure you wouldn't like to have your guilt or innocence decided this way! The people of a jury are a small group who manage to move beyond public opinion by thinking and learning instead of just reacting. That is the focus of this handbook.

Of course, there is still a role for including public opinion, and we'll explore that as well. Overall, we are aiming to show what approach works best in specific circumstances. Agenda-setting to find areas of public concern is a good example of a well-suited opinion approach.

One of the major causes of large-scale protests is that parties and parliaments have become disconnected from the problems that people want their leaders to be addressing: airing these concerns and getting them on the agenda is a sound use of opinion mechanisms, especially digital tools. Importantly, this approach can be paired with public judgment processes to help explore what answers an informed citizen wants their parliament to consider.

Can we get citizens to think in depth and not act on self-interest and opinion? Yes.

Can we get citizens to think in depth and not act on self-interest and opinion? Yes. We are confident we can help by creating incentives for citizens to explore issues in depth, to the point where a real mix of people of all ages and backgrounds can stand behind a common ground position, which helps you act on a tough policy problem.

Our vision of success is that governments from across varying political spectrums can announce policies that contain tough decisions, and the rest of the population trusts the approach, used the same way they would accept the verdict of a jury in the courts. A mechanism with depth and transparency lets leaders take hard decisions.

There’s one reason to do this. Done well, a diverse mix of everyday people will be willing to stand next to leaders and advocate for a decision. If you can accept that you are better off sharing a problem rather than trying to sell a single solution, then this approach can work well for you.

A NEW WAY TO THINK: NO “RIGHT” ANSWERS.

There are few if any, “right” decisions for a government; instead, the ideal decision reflects a position of informed support from a wide cross-section of the community.

Say, for example, you have been elected to office because you have told your community you have some clear answers. That’s absolutely fine: this is not a silver bullet mechanism for use in all situations. Citizens’ assemblies offer a complementary option for when you have a hard problem and can’t see a decision that will earn public trust.

Public safety and crime are one well-suited topic. If you don’t toughen laws, then you may be accused of being “asleep on the job” and “not protecting our kids and families;” but do the opposite, and you can equally be attacked for being overly reactive. If you hire experts to recommend policy, a cynical public might think lobbyists and donors wrote the important parts! You can’t win. **This scenario is an ideal starting point for using a citizens’ assembly.**

Energy policy is also often difficult, as our public opinion and way of thinking can be ideologically driven. If you have a strong



CASE STUDY

KINGDOM OF MOROCCO

TRAINING AFRICA’S NEXT GENERATION OF LEADERS

Overview: Bridge Africa, a network hosted at University Mohammed VI Polytechnique (UM6P) in Morocco, has incorporated deliberative methods into its leadership development programs for emerging leaders across Africa. It recognizes that Africa’s demographic reality – a young population governed largely by older politicians – is driving the need for a new form of democratic leadership.

The Project: In 2025, its African Public Leadership Academy brought together 30 participants from 13 countries for a six-month program combining in-person learning, online workshops, and a group project. Alongside more traditional leadership training, participants were introduced to deliberative approaches as a way of addressing complex public challenges.

The Results: A central exercise involved a simulated Citizens’ Assembly using sortition. Participants considered a challenging policy question—whether African countries should rely more heavily on domestic resources than foreign investment—and worked through a structured process of learning, deliberation, and recommendation development. The exercise was designed to demonstrate how diverse groups can move beyond initial positions, consider

competing perspectives, and develop shared recommendations.

The program also explored the use of artificial intelligence tools within deliberative settings. Participants used large language models to test assumptions, identify gaps in reasoning, and generate alternative perspectives for consideration during discussions.

The Academy illustrates how deliberative methods can be used as a leadership development tool, helping future leaders build skills in collaborative problem-solving, evidence-based discussion and collective decision-making.

Source: Mohammed VI Polytechnic University (UM6P); Young leaders explored new models of African leadership at the Bridge Africa Summit 2025



Participants of the Citizens' Assembly focused on local climate resilience and sustainable development in traditional communities in Bujaru, Pará state, Brazil (2024) ©Marina Lim – supplied by Silvia Cervellini.

preference for one policy approach, then that is a decision you should take as you normally would.

If you are open to any solution, then you may benefit from asking your community how they would set the policy. Whether they answer this using pricing and taxing mechanisms, or subsidies, or direct investment, shouldn't matter to you if you accept that there is no "right" decision, just one that works for your community.

But to do this, you will need to know the view of an informed public.

- **What problem am I willing to publicly share, without offering my view on its solution?**
- **On what issue would I most want a group of everyday people standing next to me when we announce a policy?**

WHEN TO DO THIS?

We have advised elected representatives in a range of countries, and one question arises more consistently than any other: When should a citizens' assembly be used? This is our answer.

- When all courses of action will earn you criticism.
- As the first step in a major reform conversation.

A politician suggesting reforms will be a magnet for criticism and an easy target; instead, suggesting a need for reform and asking citizens what reforms they can live with, grounds the conversation in the wider community, heading off a potential (predictable) scare campaign.

- When it is possible that people's views, after about 40 hours spread across several months, will be different to what they think after 2 minutes.
- You've commissioned an expert review and you wish citizens knew the contents of its resulting report as well as you do. We can't get millions of people to think, but we can get 50 people to engage with this and have millions of people listen to them.
- Any scenario where the everyday person would not think you have already made a decision.

WHAT IS REQUIRED OF ELECTED LEADERS?

You are not abrogating your responsibility. You will:

1. Sign off on the question put to a diverse group of citizens.

You should listen to deliberative practitioners on the wording (it affects how the group will approach the task—the question itself needs to stimulate discussion and deliberation) ,but be satisfied that the proposed question addresses the hardest part of the problem you are facing.

2. Set some boundary conditions. For example, “The government can spend \$3m on this issue.” Or, “Anything within my portfolio I can act on. Anything outside my portfolio, I will pass on to the relevant minister to deliver a response.”

3. Authorise and legitimise the project by owning the question and clearly showing people that you intend to listen to a deep and informed discussion before taking your decision. Be ready to make a public statement at the beginning of the project, indicating you are sharing a question and are ready to respond to any recommendations.

4. Make a substantive response. You are not “handing over” a decision: you are owning a more inclusive process which is designed to address those big problems listed at the beginning of the chapter. When citizens give you a recommendation, with reasoning and evidence, then you should commit to responding with similar depth.

As a representative, you set the agenda and build a framework to listen before you make your decision. This document gives you the leading framework to help you achieve that.

In reviewing the process design, we suggest elected representatives think about ‘What kind of process lets politicians truly trust the people?’

WHERE HAS THIS WORKED?

One story we think everyone in the world should look at comes from Ireland. It’s not one of our projects, but it presents the clearest real-world example of a government being able to take a very politically difficult decision.

In a traditional and quite religious country, a Right-aligned government has been able to explore reforms in the areas of equal marriage rights and abortion laws.

Centrally, what the Irish Parliament did was open itself to a meaningful role for everyday citizens. Their first project involved blending 66 randomly selected citizens with a mix of 33 MPs as an exercise that built up mutual trust between the two groups. Subsequently, the government took advantage of a mechanism whereby they could refer a challenging issue to a randomly-selected group of citizens. This group, who looked ‘like Ireland in one room,’ then heard from dozens of sources and discussed the issue among themselves for several months before finding some common ground. Their input into parliament helped leaders to lead (see case study on next page).

We don’t ask you to take a position on these issues, but instead, just to accept one idea: *does putting that issue on the political agenda seem like a politically difficult and risky thing to do?* If so, then this handbook will help you understand how they were able to do it.

In Uganda, the government had issues with its programs failing to dissuade local communities from living in an area frequently affected by flooding. In this case, the bureaucracy and some NGOs simply didn’t have the right expertise and local experience that was found in people with a long history on the land. By being open to a new approach, a university was able to host a research project, getting input from active interests in balance with a significant random sample of people.

Some tricky cultural norms, especially around age and gender, were overcome in the Uganda project simply by explaining how the chosen process only works if it includes everyone (a man can’t take his wife’s or adult child’s place, for example).



CASE STUDY

IRELAND

A CITIZEN'S ASSEMBLY ON REPEALING THE EIGHTH CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT

Overview: In 2016, the Oireachtas (Ireland's parliament) established a Citizens' Assembly made up of 99 randomly selected citizens and an independent Chairperson. The Assembly, which was representative in demographic terms of the general population, was asked to deliberate on key constitutional and policy issues, including the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution, which concerned restrictions on abortion rights.

The Project: Between November 2016 and April 2017, the members of the Assembly heard over the course of five weekends from expert witnesses and public submissions, before voting on their recommendations regarding changes to the Constitution and legislation regarding abortion.

The Results: A majority of the members voted to recommend changes to the Constitution and replacing it with a provision empowering the Oireachtas—that is, Parliament—to legislate on termination of pregnancy. The Assembly also endorsed broad grounds in favour of legalising abortion, ranging from risks to physical or mental health, rape, or fatal foetal abnormalities to unrestricted access in early pregnancy.

Acting on these recommendations, a referendum was held on 25 May 2018, in which the public voted decisively to repeal the Eighth Amendment with around 66-69% backing repeal, enabling Parliament to regulate abortion.

Subsequently, the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 was passed, legalising abortion—particularly up to 12 weeks of gestation with further provisions—with full legislative authority granted to the Oireachtas. This process stands as a landmark in deliberative democracy—demonstrating how a bottom-up citizen forum can influence public debate and constitutional reform on deeply polarising issues.

Source: Citizens' Assembly Secretariat, Ireland.
<https://citizensassembly.ie/>

At the outset, the process was limited to gathering information on a set of options presented by the government. Through speaking to stakeholders and residents, they found that these options didn't account for the local context adequately.

In the end, government policy was implemented with greater nuance and understanding of how people manage in times of flood. As a result, farmers were able to access land while government had the understanding of what those people would do (build homes on higher land; and stay with extended family outside the affected area) in order to avoid a blanket ban on using valuable land.

The principle in each case was to share the decision and do so in a way that involves giving considerable time and access to information for a small random sample of the population picked in a civic lottery. Done well, those people will be the peoples explaining the reasoning behind their recommendation to the rest of the population.

INTRODUCING THE SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF DELIBERATION

We think there are seven fundamental problems with the regular public sector approach to engagement, and these problems become your problems. These seven principles address them.

You should have them in mind when you next think “we need to consult the people on this issue.”

This may seem obvious, but in most of our work around the world, we find government consultations struggle to meet even one of these principles.

In a recent major decision where there was public involvement, how many of these principles do you think were met? What one change would have made the most difference?



01

A CLEAR AND OPEN REMIT

A clear, plain-language challenge or question is placed before a group. This is a neutrally phrased, open-ended question that goes to the core of the issue and provides a strong platform for discussion about priorities and trade-offs.



02

DIVERSITY OF INFORMATION

Detailed, in-depth information is provided to the participants to help them understand the nuances and complexities of the issue. Through the different stages of the process, a diversity of sources will be brought into the discussion. These include the introductory information kit, parliamentary committee reports, and the views of the wider community, stakeholders, experts, and think tanks. By doing this, the group can move beyond opinion to an informed and balanced view. Not all participants read everything, but collectively, an enormous amount is read, understood, and shared in the conversations and decisions. Assembly members will also spend extensive time asking questions and identifying sources they trust for the information they need.



03

REPRESENTATIVE

A stratified random sample of the community is recruited through a civic lottery. Simple demographic filters (age, gender, location, housing situation, employment status) are used to help stratify this sample to reflect the entire population. Most public engagement by governments does not enable a representative cross-section of the community to be heard; instead, incentives to participate are often

geared toward those with the most acute interest or abundant time. It is important for members of the assembly to deliberate with people with differing perspectives and backgrounds; a democratic lottery delivers this.



04

EXTENDED TIME

The goal of this process is to find common ground among people with very different views, not to aggregate individual views (like a poll). By engaging with experts and each other, participants can develop a deeper understanding of a complex issue and work together to identify trusted sources of information. Throughout the process, participants will engage in various exercises to approach the problem from different angles and to have ample time for discussion before making final recommendations. Time is a critical factor for this type of deliberation so people are not pushed into an agreement-- they are given time to find agreement.



05

INFLUENCE

The citizens' assembly's final report must have weight. It needs to be considered at the highest relevant level of decision-making power and responded to directly. Some participants will be asked to present their report and

recommendations directly to the decision-maker to demonstrate the gravitas of the report and the participants' role. Insistent voices talk when no one is listening; invited voices need the incentive of a decision-maker's commitment to respond.



06

DIALOGUE NOT DEBATE

The task for the group is to find common ground on answers to their remit. The process does not use simple majorities, and it is not a debate of one position seeking to defeat another. Instead, it asks people what trade-offs or changes they can accept to reach an agreement. A minimum level of 80% of the room must agree to a recommendation for it to be published. This assures leaders that there is genuinely broad support. There is room for contributions that do not meet this threshold but add value to the report.



07

FREE RESPONSE

The citizens' assembly is not being asked to critically review a government or parliamentary reform proposal. Rather, the assembly is given a “blank page” and provides a set of recommendations with a rationale that emerges from their shared learning.

This combination of time, information, and deliberation produces a deep understanding of a topic and the nuanced trade-offs involved in making difficult public decisions.

THE BIG CHANGE: PUBLIC OPINION VS PUBLIC JUDGMENT

Typically, information on what the public wants is given to leaders in the form of public opinion polls (and voting, of course). These are opinions from the community that are collected, often on short notice, without much *informed* thought on the matter. While this can have advantages in campaigning, it can make life difficult when in office.

This is not the fault of either the community or you as politicians – it is the result of the political systems we have designed. But the fundamental problem with this way of making public decisions is that it is responsive to the wrong input. Decisions are made responding to public opinion and not to public judgment.

Where public opinion measures the public's top-of-mind (1-2 minute) response to a question or issue, public judgment is their 40+-hour response after having access to diverse sources of information, critical thinking, and deliberation with other diverse members of their community. This combination of time, information, and deliberation produces a deep understanding of a topic and the nuanced trade-offs involved in making difficult public decisions. With all the new inputs, it is likely they will realise they need to change their views. This is a good thing, as they will explain that uncomfortable experience to others.

This is the core of doing democracy better: more people need to genuinely own the decision and not leave it to one or two people in an office.

The distinction between public opinion and public judgment highlights the problems with the way we currently 'do democracy.' Public opinion rewards the persuasiveness of an idea in an environment that lacks critical depth and breadth of thinking. It makes it difficult for elected political representatives to put forward complex long-term trade-off decisions because of the short-term electoral imperative. It ultimately leads to a more polarised and partisan political environment.



CASE STUDY

AUSTRALIA

CITIZENS' JURY ON NUCLEAR FUEL CYCLE

Overview: In 2016, the Premier of South Australia, Jay Weatherill, turned to the Citizens Assembly method in order to start a conversation, 'too hard for politics as usual.' The question was whether the State should build a facility to store the entire world's high-level nuclear waste.

The Project: The most successful element of the year-long project involved having a randomly-selected group of 50 South Australians from all walks of life read the 318-page Royal Commission report into the Nuclear Fuel Cycle and answer the question, 'What does everyone in South Australia need to know about this proposal?'

The Results: Their self-written report demonstrated people's capacity to engage with a technical, complex, and contentious topic and ask insightful questions of a government.

Following a statewide roadshow involving town hall meetings, polling and surveys, a second jury of 350 people was assembled to gauge whether to proceed further. Premier Weatherill has spoken about the insight from citizens who were immersed in the topic for months and how that informed policy direction.

Equally, the project generated an array of lessons for people operating major, high-controversy projects. Optimal group sizes of 35-50 people need to be preserved, and where a larger number is desirable for other reasons, the design should ensure people spend the bulk of their time in these smaller group sizes. Otherwise, incentives for learning and listening tend to lessen. Equally, the project's timing was another lesson. The Assembly process concluded just before a state election campaign which created a heightened incentive for external stakeholders to disrupt the process.

This remains Australia's largest public deliberation project, and one of the most ambitious topics attempted by a political leader who saw that he could get beyond public opinion by calling on a public judgment mechanism. The golden rule is that you haven't already made the decision.

Source: The newDemocracy Foundation, www.newdemocracy.com.au

WHEN NOT TO USE THIS APPROACH

FIRST

the golden rule is that you haven't already made the decision.

By design, it is operationally impossible to get a random group of people to stand behind a decision they don't support. This is a key integrity measure. But this nuance can be lost if there is a wide public belief that you will take a given decision anyway, then this is not the time.

SECOND

if the issue has become so controversial, the public will no longer believe the sentence above! If that happens, you will need people holding the opposing view will need to join you in supporting this process as a way of moving beyond the stalemate.

THIRD

make sure you have time. Citizens who feel in any way rushed to a decision will think 'the fix is in' and be open to describing their mistrust.

FOURTH

if you're not able to act upon whatever is decided by the assembly.

Creating a process that focuses on public judgment not only improves the contribution that everyday people can make as a complementary mechanism for elected political bodies.

It improves the ability for these political bodies to adequately deal with difficult decisions by adding a new voice to public discourse: that of the everyday person. Governments often hear from those representing lower-income groups: this is a way to involve people actually affected, not just those acting in their name. The wider community can tell the difference.

The goal is to create community cohesion around trade-offs, compromise, and consensus, giving society the ability to make hard decisions.

Restoring the public's trust in political decision-making can be achieved by letting people explore the trade-offs for themselves and being open to responding to their informed view.

Thinking of your answers from a few pages earlier, where you picked a hard issue:

- **Have you already made a decision? Or have a single preferred result? Could you set that aside?**
- **Is the issue controversial—has it been on the front page of the newspapers multiple times in the last two months?**
- **Do I have at least 5 months before I need to make a decision?**
- **Are you willing to take the outcome of the citizens' assembly seriously by carefully considering all recommendations?**

WHY USE A CIVIC LOTTERY?

Another question that political leaders frequently ask is, *"Can't we do the process with people drawn from interest groups (who are making noise and need to be mollified)?"*

The answer is no.

A stratified (matched to basic population characteristics like age, gender, and location) random selection of citizens remains the best way we have found to get genuinely representative groups of people together. A key problem with a great deal of engagement and advocacy is that the noisiest voices dominate.

When the community sees ‘people like me’ engaging in high-level co-decision exercises, they are significantly more likely to trust the complex trade-off decisions that need to be made.

Announce a new regulation for an industry, and you will hear from those who are the most incensed by the decision and those with the most to lose. You should still make sure you listen to these voices, but we recommend adding a counterbalancing voice of a representative sample of the community.

Today, those advocates, often with completely opposing positions, come to your door, and they are very hard to make happy. Offering them the chance to make their case to a group of everyday citizens gives all a fair hearing and gives you the chance to hear a mediated view of where the community finds a fair trade-off between these advocated positions. **This is both good policy and good politics.**

For countries with the jury system, the jury tends to be a trusted institution, so random selection taps into that trust. Even without that, people trust random draws in lotteries and sporting competitions as something very hard to cheat.

Most important is what results: rather than elites and highly activist voices being the sole owners of a decision, random selection brings the casually interested into the decision. Their calm voice, sharing what they have learned, is almost always missing today.

Finding a way through the challenges facing every community involves making complex trade-off decisions that go beyond public opinion and wish-listing. A more informed understanding of the challenges and opportunities can expose what level of tolerance residents have for changes to their local community. The challenge is to hear from the full range of community members, stakeholders, and generations, not just the special interest groups or noisy and active voices within the community.

When the community sees ‘people like me’ engaging in high-level co-decision exercises, they are significantly more likely to trust the complex trade-off decisions that need to be made. This empowers traditional representative political actors to put forward solutions to complex or controversial political problems. It complements their role in a way that improves the democratic process broadly and significantly.



CASE STUDY

PORTUGAL

REINVIGORATING DEMOCRACY CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY

Overview: Increasing mistrust of democratic institutions is a serious challenge globally. In 2017, Portugal gathered a sample of citizens to address this problem with the aim of “reinvigorating Portuguese democracy.”

This was the first mini-public organised in Portugal and enjoyed enormous visibility, with the participants being received by the President of Portugal, Marcelo Rebelo de Sousa. The Vice-President of the Parliament also took an active role in the process.

The Project: Approximately 20 participants were selected using sortition, and with the support of a facilitator, they deliberated for 2 days debating various proposals to best minimise the distance that separates elected officials from the general public, and how to improve communication between them.

The Results: At the end of the assembly, five concrete recommendations to improve communication between citizens and elected representatives were presented directly to the President at a public event in Lisbon.

Amongst the Portuguese community, the deliberation topic was viewed as having vital importance. It attracted significant media attention due to the direct involvement and endorsement of the President.

Source: [Forum dos Cidadãos.](http://forumdoscidadaos.org)
www.forumdoscidadaos.org

How will you ensure that the community sees the selection process as fair?

- **Who (or what) does my community trust most today?**
For example, in Islamic countries a simple draw done by an imam (random selection being expressed as ‘chosen by God’) has been seen as something most people will have faith in.
- **Do they trust anything involving random draws like lotteries or draws for football competitions?**

WHAT IS DELIBERATION?

At its simplest, deliberation involves participants in a discussion having an equal chance to speak and contribute, balanced by the broadest access to sources of information.

Deliberation is a central feature of parliamentary decision-making. Citizens’ assemblies are designed to create a structured environment in which citizens can examine complex issues in depth and provide considered input to elected decision-makers.

Deliberation can be done as an individual or as a group. There are merits in both, but where sufficient time exists, we think the exploration of trade-off and compromise, which comes from doing this as a group, has the most value.

WHAT ABOUT THE MEDIA?

Around the world, a very wide mix of media outlets have one thing in common: they are very sure that their readers and viewers would do a better job than the people in elected office. This methodology lets you agree with them: when you use a civic lottery, you are involving their readers. You should let the media know.

The media is an important partner because it helps tell the story of 30-50 people and shares it with a population many times larger.

As a basic principle, you want the media to meet the citizens early on before they have had time to form strong views: the purpose of that is to show their readers that ‘people like me’ are involved in this decision.

HOW CAN YOU DELIVER DEMOCRACY BEYOND ELECTIONS?

01

Pick a long-term problem where public opinion is stalling decision-making.

02

Ask that your department to produce an assembly design based on some of the advice in this handbook.

03

Get in touch with us. We can offer advice and help connect you with a local partner familiar with the approach.



A meeting of the Yukon Citizens' Assembly in Canada (2024).



CASE STUDY

CANADA

YUKON CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Overview: The Yukon Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform was tasked by the Yukon Legislative Assembly with examining and discussing different ways of electing their territorial government and making a recommendation on whether to keep the current voting system or adopt a different one. The legislative committee did not recommend an alternative electoral system and asked that the citizens' assembly come to a recommendation on how officials should be elected.

The Project: The citizens assembly involved 38 participants from across the Yukon, learning and deliberating over eight days (four weekends). The Yukon is a large and remote territory that is sparsely populated, with most Yukoners living in and around the capital city. Some areas have limited access to high-speed and reliable internet, which has led to high travel costs. This was a consideration when designing the Assembly.

The 38 participants were required to learn a lot about a technical topic in a short time (eight days over four weekends). The Assembly spent most of the first two weekends learning from experts, and the second weekend was a deep dive into electoral systems with Dr. Jonathan Rose, department head of Political Studies from Queen's University. Dr. Rose used a dynamic and interactive approach that worked well with the small group facilitators, and participants spoke highly of his involvement. While relying heavily on a single expert is not generally desirable, it was necessary within this project's context.

Optional Zoom sessions were also held over the summer that were recorded and transcribed so that those who could not attend could access them. Participants used these to reinforce learning, fill gaps, and answer additional questions they had in a way that was accessible while minimizing travel costs and maximizing the short amount of time we had with the assembly as a whole group.

"I think it did create a community. I wasn't expecting that, but in hindsight, that's exactly how our system should operate, rather than how divisive it is." –Brent, Yukon Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform.

The timeline for the citizens' assembly to complete its work was short. In response to this challenge, building social cohesion within the group had to be built into the design. Shared meals and deliberately mixing tables so that all participants had an opportunity to meet and work together were important parts of this. Another element was having a First Nations elder present at the opening and closing circles during each session. This was a time where all members and staff had an opportunity to speak.

In the post-Assembly survey, 67% of respondents said that their opinion on electoral reform changed throughout the citizens' assembly process, and about half credited the deliberation and discussion with the other assembly members for that change.

The Results: The Citizens' Assembly ultimately recommended a ranked vote to replace first-past-the-post as the territory's electoral system.

"They came to deal with a problem, and they focused on it. They showed more respect for each other than they did for holding on to their positions or their alignments. They were willing to listen to each other. That is something that gets lost in many legislative assemblies. Maybe there is an example here for us." –John Streicker, Member of the Yukon Legislative Assembly.

Source: Sara Mcphee-Knowles, smcpheeknowles@yukonu.ca / scholar.yukonu.ca/smcphreeknowles/



The South Australian Nuclear Citizens Jury handing over their report to Premier Jay Weatherill in Adelaide. (Photo by Matt Turner / Newspix).

Chapter 03

FOR SENIOR OFFICIALS: PLANNING AND PREPARING

“WE’RE SEEING A BREAKDOWN IN THE ABILITY OF GOVERNMENTS TO SOLVE THE BIG PROBLEMS THAT ARE CONFRONTING THEIR CITIZENS, AND THE REASON THEY’RE HAVING TROUBLE DOING THAT IS BECAUSE THE PUBLIC DEBATE HAS BECOME SO POLARISED.

PEOPLE GET IN THEIR CORNERS AND THERE’S A WHOLE LOT OF WISHFUL THINKING, BUT NOT A LOT OF SERIOUS DISCUSSIONS OF COMPROMISE AND TRYING TO ACTUALLY GET TO THE SOLUTION. ”

THE HON. JAY WEATHERILL PREMIER OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA 2011-2018

COMMISSIONED MULTIPLE CITIZENS JURIES, INCLUDING THE 2016 CITIZENS JURY ON THE NUCLEAR FUEL CYCLE.

WHEN TO USE A CITIZENS ASSEMBLY: CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

This chapter provides clear and, concise guidance for public officials who may be asked to approve a citizens’ assembly project but are not yet familiar with this type of engagement. It offers a summary of what they need to know, focusing on the key decision points that help minimize risk and maximize the value of a citizens’ assembly.

It’s not uncommon for senior officials to see public involvement in decision-making as risky. They may worry that the public could make uninformed or infeasible requests, or that the process will be unpredictable because the participants are not known in advance. Others fear that the process will be inefficient compared to drawing on internal staff who already have deep subject knowledge. These concerns are understandable, especially given the limitations of many common forms of engagement.

The goal with deliberative approaches like citizens’ assemblies is to address each of these concerns and turn community involvement in public decision making into an asset, not a burden.

By giving people the time, resources, and incentives to become reasonably informed, you enable them to make better decisions as a group rather than as individuals making a wishlist of



Assembly members sharing their calls to action with the commissioning government minister for the Children and Young People’s Assembly on Biodiversity Loss -Ireland (2022). © RUA Productions.

demands. Civic lottery ensures you will hear from a diverse group reflective of the wider community and not just the loudest or best resourced. While this all takes time, the legitimacy gains allow empowered leaders and senior officials to act on sound decisions, unblocking years of hesitation built under the weight of public opinion.

A citizens' assembly is not a tool for every engagement task. One project every year or two, or per a term of government, is probably the right balance. At the same time, the principles outlined in Chapter 2 (see Page 54) make sense to apply to a range of engagement projects. This chapter is for those being asked to commit to a major project.

The goal of making existing engagement approaches, such as surveys and town-hall meetings, more deliberative is to channel the productive insight of the community in a way that is useful for you as a decision maker. Surveys may be familiar to staff but are not always useful. You can have quick successes by making small changes to your approach. By including the community in a problem-sharing and problem-solving capacity, you shift the public conversation away from heated discussions toward finding common ground solutions based on an informed position.

For now, let's focus on a checklist that can help heads of agencies have confidence that conditions are right.

GREEN FLAG VS RED FLAG - SIX POINTS TO BE CLEAR ON

▶ Green flag #1: Time

A considerable amount of time is required to properly operate and execute a long-term deliberative project. Participants often require more than 30 hours which is best when spread out with 2-3 weeks between meetings. This helps people slow down, think, and become sufficiently informed. This means that the participants are satisfied that they have had the time to consider the right amount of breadth and depth of information sources), to discuss perspectives with one another and to form agreement on recommendations.

If you have 6-7 months before a decision is required, you should have no problem with time. Expect to spend 3-4 months in preparation, then 3 months operating the citizens' assembly.

▶ Red flag?

Situations where decisions must be made quickly are not suitable for a citizens' assembly-style project. Solving a multi-year wicked problem is generally the best starting point. If an issue has evaded resolution for many years, you likely have 6 months to do this right.

With less time, you can make scope or scale adjustments to provide limitations on the types of decisions you're asking a group to make. **If you shorten the time, you need to shrink the task.** In these situations, it is important that you are transparent with the reasoning behind any scope limitations. When people feel like they are deliberately being constrained or limited in any way, they become cynical or distrustful of the entire process (defeating its very purpose).

For example, you may want to have deliberative input into decisions around the construction of a new airport, train line, or similar piece of major infrastructure. However, the decision has already been made to build the airport, and you have a small-time window to complete the process. You may then limit the scope of the question (Remit) to one focused on how to minimise

disruption instead of a broader scope that can reopen discussions on parts of the project which are already decided.

A Deliberative Poll that suggests some potential solutions require a much shorter time frame and can capture changing positions on an issue, but it will not have the same impact as citizens' standing behind recommendations. For example, a government would like to address a budgetary issue:

- Surveys can gather views on values and priorities over 1-3 months.
- A wide community consultation can gather more considered and informed views from active interests over 1-2 months.
- A Deliberative Poll can gather considered and informed views before and after a period of deliberation, including some pre-reading.
- A citizens' assembly-type deliberation will get recommendations on a question such as 'How can we live within our means?' but will take ~3-4 months to plan and another ~3-4 months to operate.

Green flag #2: The political context isn't radioactive.

If the topic under consideration is not dominating news coverage for an extended period, then you likely have conditions to proceed.

Red flag?

This is not a last-minute approach for where an issue gets highly controversial: all that the public will see is a government avoiding a decision rather than genuinely listening. Similarly, a project or topic clearly identified with a particular campaign result makes a process untenable. Participants will see this immediately, and the entire project will lose its legitimacy, undermining any effort to share the problem and likely also undermining any future deliberative projects.

Deliberative processes are centred on a considered common-ground agreement that is undermined when placed at the center of a live political disagreement. Not because the participants are incapable of resolving an otherwise intractable problem, but because the additional pressure makes it more difficult for everyday people to patiently and appropriately consider all sides of an argument and reach an agreement.

The only exception here is where you can adequately address #4 below.

Green flag #3: The resources available are proportionate to the project being considered.

Some decisions will impact an entire country or an entire region. These decisions should include people from all over and not just in major cities. The process should only proceed if there are resources available to ensure the participation of people from all impacted areas.

Red flag?

For example, if you're making a decision on major infrastructure spending for the state but cannot run a process large enough to include people from regional and rural areas (where applicable), then you should change the format or scope. Excluding people who would be impacted by a decision in the decision-making process is a sure way to undermine trust. If you only have the budget to allow citizens to spend 4 days on a large-scale topic (e.g. climate and energy transition), then, again, we would strongly recommend a different format or scope.

Green flag #4: Broad political awareness, minimum buy-in, and stakeholder understanding.

When representatives from different parties (or a minister and an opposition minister) have been briefed equally, then there is a high likelihood of project success. This should then be extended to planned briefings for active interests spanning a spectrum of views.

If these two actions have been taken, the project is substantially de-risked.

Red flag?

If a bloc of interests representing one side of an argument is attacking the process, you should not proceed. This method is used to earn public trust, and for most everyday people, it will be something they have not heard of before. Therefore, if the first messages they hear are suggesting bad intentions and controversy, they will be naturally sceptical.

It is important that you include participants from across the political spectrum in the process. We strongly recommend briefings to opposition parties to keep them abreast of the process and explain their opportunities for contribution.

Hostile opponents can also impact the willingness of people to participate or increase the scepticism around commitments to implementation. Involve bi-partisan democratic reform groups or other trusted non-political organisations (this varies too much from country to country to give an example) to brief politicians from all sides, before a project is commissioned.

▶ Green flag #5: Clear lines of responsibility

The ideal starting point is an issue with a single Minister and a single department responsible. A good example is the Department of Planning. While the issue will likely touch on the work of other parts of the government (people discussing future housing will likely want to know the Education Department's plans for schools and the Transport Department's plans for roads and trains), the core responsibility for the decision ends up within one department.

Some decisions will overlap heavily with different departments. This will require that both CEOs and Ministers are on board. If citizens cannot get answers to their questions, it will erode trust in the project. If you commit authority to recommendations and you do not have cooperative approval for and ultimately cannot implement the recommendations that are made by everyday people, you will undermine trust in both your government and in deliberative processes more broadly. If a national government asks a question about fair and efficient ways to raise taxes, and citizens discover it is state or local taxes that they most want reformed, can you make a public commitment to securing a substantive response from those state or local leaders? If so, citizens will feel heard, and the engagement will successfully navigate these inevitable overlaps in jurisdiction.

▶ Red flag?

Issues affecting multiple jurisdictions have a high degree of difficulty, and those commissioning the project should be clear about what they will do if recommendations are received that are only actionable by another tier of government.

▶ Green Flag #6: Openness to all possible answers

You must be prepared to respond to any recommendation. As you will not be able to shape the final decision of the group, you must be prepared to respond to all (not necessarily accept) possible recommendations. If the government cannot accept this, then limiting the scope (through the question asked) is essential.

▶ Red Flag?

We have encountered scenarios where a government was confident in every aspect of the citizens' assembly method: that a representative group of people could work together, explore diverse sources to understand the issue in depth, and arrive at common ground recommendations supported by reasoning and evidence. But in the exploration phase, they realised that some of the likely outcomes were not viable for political reasons. It was a good decision not to proceed further rather than waste citizens' time.



CASE STUDY

INDIA

PUNE AND PRIMPRI CHINCHWAD CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES ON MOBILITY

Overview: Mobility is a complex issue and presents a governance challenge in many Indian cities. The Pimpri Chinchwad and Pune urban regions have a poor record of road safety, high levels of congestion, and air pollution. The local governments have piloted street design improvements but negotiating the change from relatively high usage of private transportation modes (motorcycles and cars), and dealing with the complexity of competing street use such as vehicle parking and street vending, has often been challenging. To promote cycling as an alternative form of transport, the Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation with the Centre for Environment Education organised a citizens assembly to ask how more people in Pradhikaran (Pimpri Chinchwad, India) be encouraged to cycle in order to benefit from improvements in street designs and cycling infrastructure.

The Project: To select participants, we explored the electoral rolls but we found that several households were not included as the lists were being updated, and complete postal addresses are not available. However, the municipal corporation was able to provide data on the number of households in each block. We learned about the organization Delibera Brasil's method of selecting addresses with spatial dispersion and randomness, using census tracts as blocks. We adapted this method to deliver invitations to every tenth house in each block of the Pradhikaran neighbourhood, with a house number between 1 and 10 chosen randomly as a start point for each block.

About 1,000 randomly selected households in the Pradhikaran neighbourhood received invitations from the municipal government to register for the assembly. From those who registered, participants were randomly selected (sortition) to meet a pre-decided assembly composition that was balanced for age, gender, spatial representativeness, and interest in cycling.

"I thought it was difficult to implement sortition, but once we worked out a method, we were happy to see the results. We were able to convene a genuinely inclusive group." —Kunal Jaiswal, Project Officer, Centre for Environment Education, Pune.

After the invitations were delivered, follow-up phone calls were made to remind people to register. Special efforts were needed to encourage women to consider participating and a second round of invitations was done through the local schools. Over 75 registrations were received. A second level of random selection was done to finalise invitations to 50 participants, balancing for gender, age, cycling interest, and spatial dispersion. Thirty-eight participants turned up for the deliberation despite heavy rainfall.

Results: The structured deliberation space of the citizens assembly helped evolve a range of recommendations that would make walking and cycling safer and more comfortable. The assembly enabled cyclists, including women and parents of children who want to cycle, to have their say among other road users. These voices are often not present or heard in the usual public consultation events, where typically, it is the more powerful or better-off sections of society who participate.

Many of the recommendations for infrastructure are being incorporated into the street designs, while others are being taken up through another municipal programme to support cycling. Certain recommendations, such as on parking management and street vending space allocation require further policy work.

Source: Centre for Environment Education; www.cceindia.org

NINE COMMON CONCERNS

Here are some common reactions that come up when trying to start a long-form deliberative process. We've provided answers that will help you explain the positive and complementary role these types of processes can play in public decision-making.

01

"It won't solve the problem."

If the methods that you have previously used have worked, then you have no need for a long form deliberation.

If the challenge is political—where public opinion is polarised or leaders fear a public backlash, a citizens' assembly can shift the conversation from conflict to problem-solving. Recommendations from a representative group of everyday people often carry greater legitimacy, and it is harder for activists or the media to attack than those developed solely by elected officials. Challenges that appear technical may actually be political—many seemingly technical decisions require the public to accept trade-offs, change behaviour, tolerate some inconvenience, or contribute additional funding.

A deliberative process will bring a broader range of voices into the room and start to unpack the issue in more depth. Public conversations often focus on the most immediate or visible aspects of a problem, which can limit the range of options available to decision-makers. For example, full jails are a problem, and new jails are very expensive. Your question for a Citizens Assembly might not be how to fund a prison, but to ask, "What should we do with people convicted of a crime?" You will receive highly informed recommendations to explore, providing elected officials a wider range of starting points to work from.

02

**“Loud advocates will still get in the room
-how will you handle this?”**

People look for support and validation of their ideas from others. In a Citizens’ Assembly process, you are unlikely to get multiple loud advocates in the room. This is because of the nature of stratified random selection. This dilutes the power of the ‘loudest voices’ as they will be involved broadly in proportion with the wider population (part of the conversation, not all of the conversation). They’ll also mix with others, approaching the topic with critical thinking and patience. The size of the group and the facilitation approach will influence how these personalities are included in the dialogue. Large groups (200+) present a vastly increase risk of this occurring and are not recommended.

03

“We don’t have the resources.”

Long-form deliberative democracy is a big commitment in time and money. There are options to reduce the overall costs by applying the key principles in shorter formats (eg. Deliberative Polling).

We would encourage decision makers to think about:

- (a) the value of resolving the issue, and;
- (b) the cost of some existing engagement approaches that deliver limited value, and that you could discontinue.

A key resourcing issue is the time required by the organisation to prepare all the background documents. At the time of writing, AI is emerging as a simple way to vastly reduce this by training an AI solely on a limited pool of materials provided by an agency, (although this approach is not without challenges and should be explored with caution).

Although preparing the background documents is a large up-front commitment of time, these documents are invaluable in the future as they allow the organisation to explain in detail their

challenges and opportunities and build community understanding.

Without being trite, a key question to consider is “what is the cost of continuing to leave the issue unresolved?” While resource-intensive, the method has a very high rate of resolving challenging issues generally seen as too difficult for normal engagement and political approaches.

04

“We don’t have the mandate from above.”

You cannot begin a deliberative democracy process without the support of decision-makers. It is important to invest the time before commencing to educate and promote the benefits (short and long term) of the deliberative process. Take the time to get senior decision makers on board before you embark on a process like this. It must be given the influence it needs otherwise it risks damaging your organisational reputation and sending the project backwards.

Often, elected decision-makers are simply unaware of what a citizens’ assembly is, and they equate it with every other form of engagement. A 1-hour workshop to explain the foundational principles is the clearest path to securing appetite for a project, often because it inverts how community engagement is normally done.

05

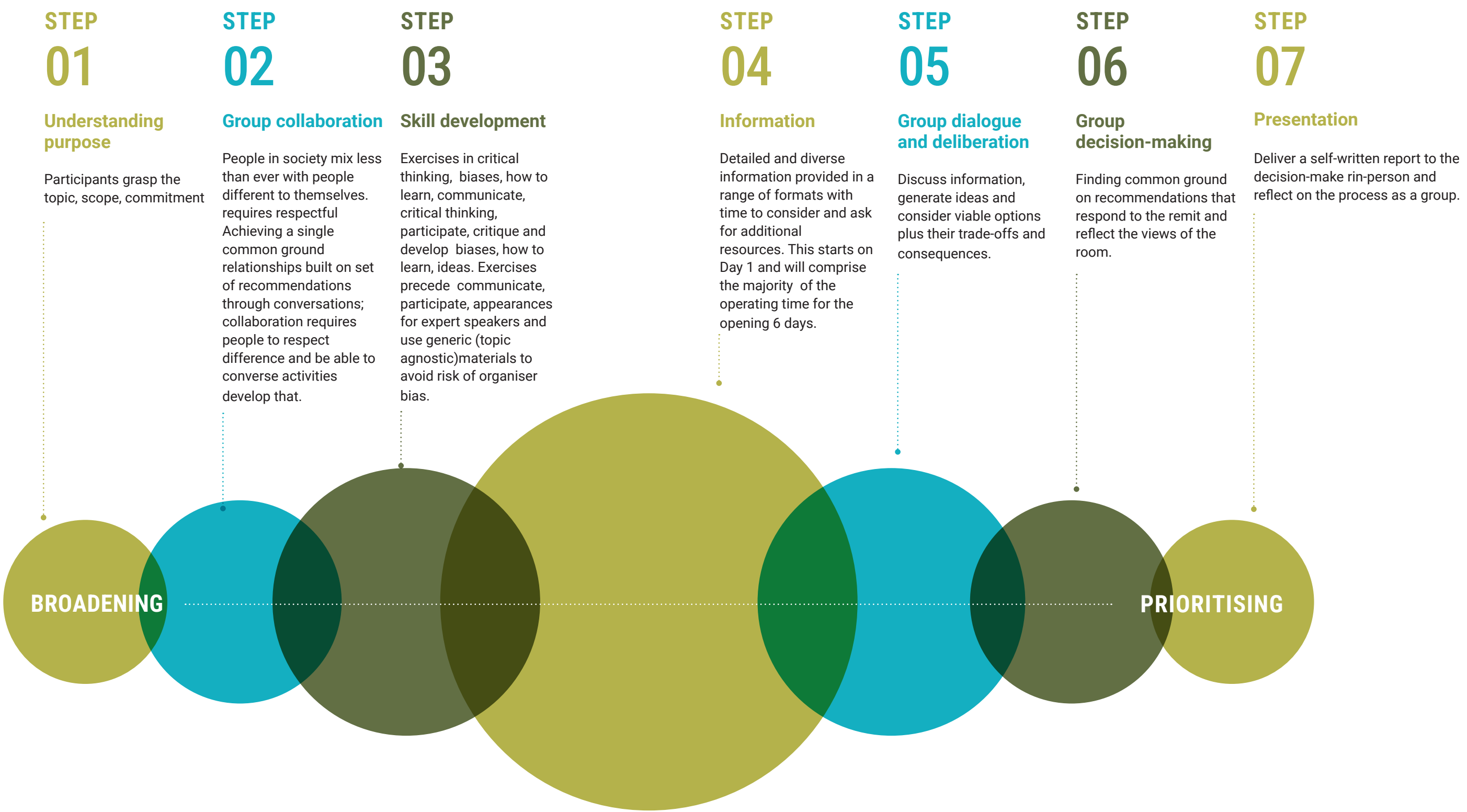
“It is too risky -we can’t control the response.”

While elected officials cannot control the citizens’ assembly recommendations, they can control:

- What question is put to the group.
- What parameters/ constraints apply
- Their response, and the additional evidence to support a different course of action, when this is necessary

THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY JOURNEY

This model showcases the broadening and narrowing stages of the journey participants undertake as they consider information, generate and identify ideas, address trade-offs and reach agreement. A deliberative process blends and weaves between these steps throughout the assembly. Detailed daily agendas are produced in the planning stages.





CASE STUDY

DENMARK

PARKING IN A MEDIEVAL CITY CENTRE

Overview: In Copenhagen, car parking is a politically sensitive issue, with strong public opposition to reducing parking options. Seeking to promote its unique bicycle culture and expand green spaces, the City of Copenhagen initiated a citizen dialogue on how to reduce car traffic and reimagine the use of space in the medieval city centre.

The Project: A Citizen's Assembly of 36 randomly selected residents—representative across gender, age, housing type, and car access—deliberated more than 24 hours across six days. They were presented with two scenarios: reducing motorised traffic by either 40% or 75%. The medieval centre, known for its narrow streets and dense mix of city functions, posed complex challenges.

Initial discussions revealed stark divisions: some participants wanted all cars removed, while others relied heavily on their vehicles. However, as deliberations progressed, participants began to understand each other's needs. Conversations shifted from opposition to opportunity—what could the space be used for instead? This shift in perspective helped sceptical participants see value in reducing parking if the freed space improved their neighbourhood.

A key breakthrough was a municipal offer to relocate parking to underused garages on the city's edge. This trade-off balanced accessibility with better urban design.

The Results: By the Assembly's end, participants recommended a 75% reduction in traffic and an 80–90% cut in parking, favouring green, non-commercial spaces amongst other recommendations. Their proposals gave city leaders the confidence to launch a two-year trial of removing parking spaces and experimenting with the city space, constituting the largest urban mobility transformation of the city in over 50 years.

Source: [We Do Democracy; wedodemocracy.com](https://wedodemocracy.com)

In Australia, the Premier of the state of South Australia asked a citizens' jury for recommendations related to reducing late-night alcohol-related violence. One of the leading recommendations from the jury was to make the city's prominent casino subject to the same liquor licensing rules as other venues. In his response to citizens, the Premier acknowledged their request as logical and backed by crime statistics but noted that the evidence they provided revealed a key gap: the jury had not considered the views of tourism operators when making their recommendation. The jury responded positively to the additional evidence. This shows that elected leaders are not constrained by recommendations but are empowered by the chance to change the conversation into one more grounded in evidence.

Some recommendations are just not possible to implement (due to legislation, policy, etc), but this must be clearly and transparently communicated back to the citizens.

Often, elected officials will find the participants' response is very reasonable, rational, and well-considered.

It is also beneficial to have decision-makers attend the project as observers to ensure they understand the time, effort, and commitment of the participants. This will highlight the struggles participants face when weighing the pros and cons challenges and considerations. Decision-makers will see how each idea is developed and explored.

06

“This issue is too technical: everyday people won't understand.”

It is important to use many formats for presenting information. These formats can include written, graphic, verbal, and smaller group conversations to ensure that the technical aspects are unpacked. Site tours are also a great informational option. You will be pleasantly surprised at how people can understand quite technical information when they are given the time to understand it properly, even if they are not experts on the subject. They also often ask very good questions about the work that helps the organisation to think differently about an 'old' problem.

07

“Decision-makers have been elected or appointed to make decisions. It’s their job and they can’t be taken out of the decision-making process.”

Deliberative processes are complementary to existing political structures. This means that decision makers are involved in setting the parameters that participants work within, and they ultimately make the final decision as to whether or not they will implement the recommendations of a deliberative process. Deliberative processes are complementary to existing political structures. Citizens provide informed advice; decision-makers remain responsible for the outcome.

08

“Stakeholder or Interest groups need to be involved.”

Stakeholders and interest groups have multiple avenues of involvement. They can be part of a reference group (page 125), they can contribute information or even present to participants, and they can observe throughout a process.

09

“We can’t share all the ‘confidential’ info required.”

You cannot undertake a deliberative process if you are not prepared to completely share the problem. If you still want to open up a specific part of the process, you will need to be very clear about why some parts are confidential or off limits. Transparency is key here (as it is throughout the process).

WHAT TO EXPECT

Citizens’ assemblies aim to build or find common ground between the participants. This can be difficult to picture if you have not seen it before, but consider the difficulty of taking 50 people chosen at random and having them agree on trade-offs and resolving a difficult public policy dilemma within just a few days. Skilled facilitation will do wonders here, but you should be prepared for the journey that will unfold.

The broad steps a process will go through include going broad with context, information, and learning before consolidating this information, prioritising aspects of the issue, developing proposals, and converging on recommendations. Each of these stages occur while citizens are on a steep learning curve, so some questions and ideas can be raised that can be unsettling to decision-makers when heard in isolation. The process accounts for this by allowing participants multiple opportunities to check the practicality of their recommendations by asking for views from experts of their choosing.

This is most acutely felt by someone in your shoes when initial draft recommendations land. They’ll be rough—there is no hiding from it. 50 people are co-authoring a document, but the process has mechanisms for addressing that. Participants benefit from the time between sessions for reflection as it provides them a first opportunity to judge the quality of their work. Critically, between the final two sessions, you will have an opportunity to provide comments. These comments aren’t assessments of your enthusiasm for the recommendations. They’re an opportunity to provide feedback on whether the recommendations can realistically be implemented, and on the clarity of the recommendations.

You’ll be answering questions such as: What would you do with this recommendation? Are there any aspects that are out of scope? Do you have any clarification questions about the intent of the recommendation? Does the intent align with the ask?

The goal is to make the process more effective for everyone. Citizens can make stronger recommendations, administrators know exactly what is being asked of them, and political leaders can be confident they are not simply being handed wishlists.



CASE STUDY

BRUSSELS, BELGIUM

ASSEMBLY HELPS TO ADAPT TO CLIMATE IMPACTS

Overview: As climate change reshapes many facets of modern life, Brussels needed a mechanism that allows citizens to help the city to meet the needs of people on a wide range of issues. Two features distinguish the Brussels model: its permanence and the presence of a follow-up committee. The permanent structure enables continuous refinement of deliberative methods and greater inclusivity over time. The follow-up committee supports the implementation phase by clarifying recommendations, interacting with policymakers, and increasing public visibility of the assembly's work.

The Project: Between 2023 and 2025, three cycles of the assembly were conducted, with each cycle bringing together between 65 and 100 randomly selected participants. Selection is based on a stratified lottery method that considers factors such as age, gender, place of residence, education level, and other social criteria. This approach is intended to ensure that the assembly reflects the diversity of the Brussels population. To improve inclusion in a highly multilingual city, measures such as translation tools, multilingual discussion tables, and a "buddy" system have been introduced. Outreach efforts also include a two-hour game designed to raise awareness among underrepresented groups, such as youth, low-educated residents, and those in vulnerable situations.

Each cycle follows a consistent process. First, the topic for the upcoming cycle is chosen by a group of 16 former participants from the previous cycle. This is followed by a new random selection of participants.

The deliberation phase spans four weekends during which participants share personal experiences, engage with expert input, discuss the topic in depth, and codevelop a report outlining long-term visions and concrete recommendations.

At the end of each cycle, a follow-up committee of 10 participants is formed. This group monitors how the recommendations are addressed by the government. Two formal feedback moments are built into the process: the first takes place three months after the final session, during which the government presents which recommendations will be acted upon and explains its reasoning. The second occurs one year later, providing further updates on implementation.

The Results: The first cycle involving 80 people focused on housing and resulted in 80 recommendations. The second cycle addressed food systems, involving 75 participants who issued 32 recommendations. The third cycle, centred on the sharing and collaborative economy, brought together 70 participants and produced 20 recommendations.

"I was surprised that many people with divergent opinions managed to agree on common proposals."
–Nico, participant Brussels Citizens Assembly on Climate, Belgium.

"Before, I felt like I was just passing through. For the first time, I feel like a citizen in Brussels and fully engaged as such." –Annarita, participant Brussels Citizens Assembly on Climate, Belgium.

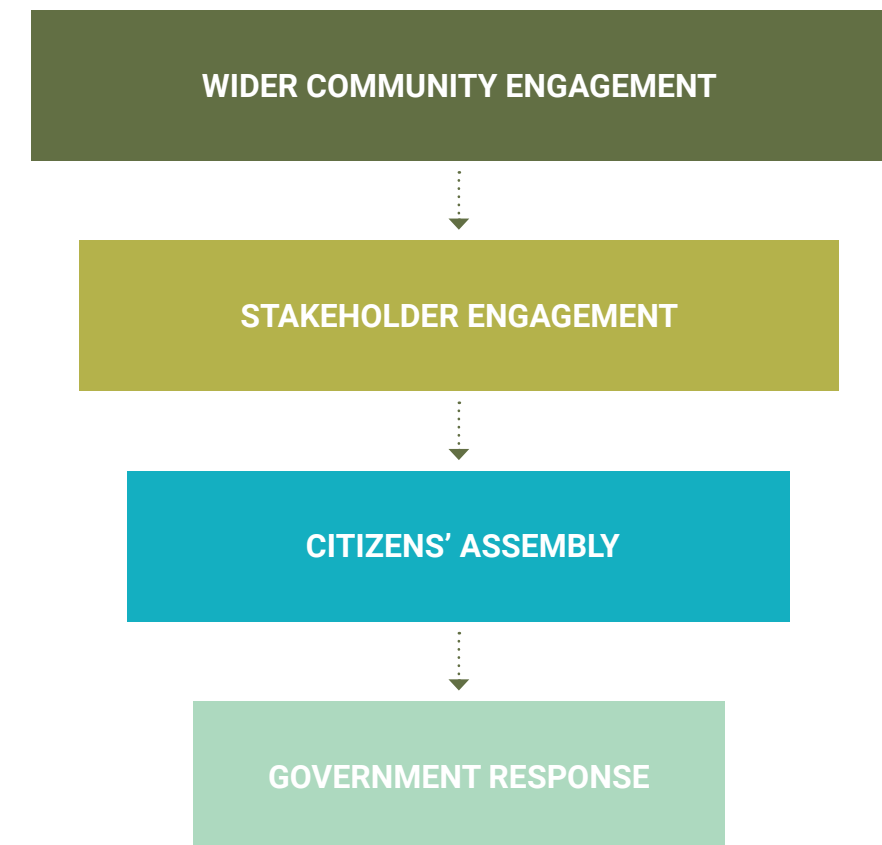
"Ordinary citizens have the ability to see where the problems lie because they experience them" –Alain Maron, Minister of Climate Transition and Democratic Participation, Belgium.

Source : Brussels Environment; <https://environnement.brussels>

WHERE DOES THIS FIT WITH WIDER COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

Your wider community engagement strategy should feed into this process. The more information participants have, the better informed they will be when making their decision. You can precede your deliberative process with some wider engagement that gathers views and values on the topic to feed into the deliberations. This is essentially a funnel-like process.

Engagement options that have been developed for hard-to-reach groups, such as lower-income cohorts or culturally and linguistically diverse communities, are an ideal way to fill the gaps that lottery selection might miss. Holding a roundtable for these communities, offering them the chance to present their recommendations to the citizens' assembly, is an effective technique that ensures these communities are heard in a process, while assembly members value the additional insight.



WHY DON'T ALL PROJECTS LOOK THE SAME?

We want people to make a decision based on the available information, but the quality and types of that information will vary by topic. The sheer range of decisions governments are required to make and the different inputs they require provide a wider range of engagement options. The context of each project will not only ultimately inform the end decision itself, but also the processes that are used along the way. These vary from process to process, and depend on various factors such as the number of people are involved, , how much time they have to make the decision, the level of authority they have, or the complementary role they play in already established political institutions.

WHAT ROLE WILL MY TEAM HAVE?

Your team's input will come at the beginning of the process. Their primary responsibility is to support the management of the process. A major piece of work will be producing the background information resources that shares the problem from your perspective. It should share the problem, what currently happens, what ideas you have for what could happen, and who you see as impacted by the decision. The goal is to provide assembly members with as much essential context and background information as reasonable.

Your team will then have the opportunity to present this information, along with answering any immediate questions. From this point onwards, your involvement will be citizen-controlled. If needed, they will ask for your input through the facilitator. This will most often take the form of answering information requests, providing additional reports, and giving feedback on draft recommendations.

HOW DO DIFFERENT CONTEXTS SHAPE PROJECTS?

You should think about three main factors: social norms, geography and resources.



CASE STUDY

BOSNIA AND HERZEGOVINA

DELIBERATION IN A POST-CONFLICT SETTING

Overview: Mostar is a city deeply divided along ethnic lines. Its post-war legacy fuels distrust between communities and towards institutions. Identity politics dominates, leaving little space for cooperation.

By 2020, Mostar had experienced a 12-year political deadlock without local elections due to entrenched ethnic party disputes. Citizens faced challenges in accessing consistent municipal services, and issues related to city cleanliness became a point of public concern. The visible accumulation of waste was broadly interpreted as a reflection of wider governance difficulties and was often associated with political divisions and limited institutional responsiveness.

The Project: The 2021 Mostar Citizens' Assembly--the first deliberative process in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in southeast Europe--resulted from an initiative of the Council of Europe to promote local democracy in Mostar.

By the time the assembly began, Mostar had held elections, and the process was co-convened by the City of Mostar. This enabled the assembly members, along with 47 randomly selected residents who were demographically and ethnically representative of the community, to address their recommendations to the newly elected officials.

Over four weekends, the assembly participants learned from experts, deliberated, and issued 32 recommendations, including concrete steps to improve waste management, green spaces, and public accountability.

The deliberation was approached with care and awareness of the local context. Mostar is a diverse community where levels of interpersonal and institutional trust remain fragile. The city endured significant intercommunal conflict during the 1990s and continues to navigate the complexities of a post-conflict environment.

Attention was given to inclusiveness in the design and facilitation of the process. To emphasize a shared civic identity, certain elements that could highlight ethnic identity differences among Assembly members were omitted. For instance, seating arrangements were organized randomly and not along ethnic or geographic lines, language was carefully chosen to avoid terminology associated with certain communities, and facilitators and experts were selected to reflect the diversity of the city. Rather than suppressing diversity, this approach created the conditions for it to become part of a shared civic identity. Citizens took their role and responsibility very seriously when it came to engaging respectfully across differences. For example, they shared diverse opinions when it was beneficial but not when it was detrimental to deliberation.

Additionally, participants made sure to have ethnic diversity among spokespersons, without prompting from facilitators or organizers. The Mostar Citizens' Assembly showed that deliberation in extremely difficult environments with low levels of trust is possible and that it can produce very valuable outcomes. For example, one Assembly member who was a vocal sceptic of the deliberative processes during the first day became a strong supporter and presented some of the recommendations to the mayor.

The Result: The Mostar City Council formally adopted all recommendations. Implementation of the recommendations is ongoing, with about a third completed and others underway. All are tracked transparently online.

Source: Council of Europe; www.coe.int

SOCIAL NORMS

The methods available will heavily depend on your own social and cultural context. We're writing this book for the 190+ countries around the world. What is normal in Australia may not be normal in Spain, and what is obvious in Peru may not be clear at all in Mongolia.

You need to consider the many different aspects of how people interact with one another normally in your country before you embark on dramatically changing the way you involve them in political decisions. Some of these considerations will include:

- Are people used to **speaking openly** in front of others? Does this apply to issues affecting the government or government decisions? Whether or not you have these norms or even protections will impact the ability of people to disagree with some political ideas. This will dramatically impact the deliberation and your ability to get people to participate. If, for example, someone cannot speak out about a law they disagree with, then deliberation cannot happen. You should consider using types of engagement that will let you gather information from people in a way close to existing norms.
- Do **men and women** have equal responsibilities and opportunities in public life? This will determine how you include men and women in sharing public decisions. You may have to think of ways to ensure women have an opportunity to contribute while being sensitive to the role they would otherwise play in public life.
- What is your community/ country's **literacy rate**? If your country has a low literacy rate, then you will need to take into consideration how you can inform participants through methods that involve in-person education or shared learning exercises that bring people along with learning through a process (such as videos).
- How is **disagreement** usually handled? What type of cultural norms might prevent face-to-face disagreement or questioning? Are there social hierarchies that might mean some demographics defer to others for answers or advice? You will need to balance these considerations to ensure the room can work together to find solutions.



CASE STUDY

BRAZIL, BUJARU

TRADITIONAL COMMUNITIES DELIBERATION IN THE AMAZON

Overview: In 2024, the Municipality of Bujaru, a rural Amazonian town in Pará state, Brazil, hosted a groundbreaking Citizens' Assembly focused on local climate resilience and sustainable development in regional production, including traditional communities. It formed the Brazilian component of the Latin (Re)surgentes project, which included citizen deliberations across four countries. Bujaru was chosen to host the Assembly following an open call designed to engage municipalities representative of the region's pursuit of economic growth alongside forest preservation. Through the open call, a relationship with the Mayor of Bujaru, the City Council and the Pará State Secretariat of the Environment, was formed and his support for the Assembly lent relevance and legitimacy to the project.

Of the traditional communities present in the Amazon four are present in Bujaru, such as quilombolas, communities descended from Afro-Brazilians who resisted slavery; Indigenous peoples; riverine communities; and chestnut collectors. Additionally, there are rural settled groups, not considered a traditional community but have a distinct relationship with the land.

The Project: 11 traditional communities participated in rounds of active-listening and co-design for the invitation and sortition processes. A total of 20 traditional community leaders were engaged for the distribution by hand of printed forms from which 92 participant registrations were received and put forward for random selection. It was agreed that from the 50 available participant slots, 10 would be reserved for these traditional registrations. Leaders

from these communities subsequently formed a Content Group for the assembly.

To ensure accessibility for participants from remote traditional communities with limited transport and internet connectivity, tailored support was provided, including arranging vans, boats, and motorcycles or covering anticipated travel costs in advance.

The results: After five full-day sessions involving expert input from bioeconomy specialists, public officials, cooperative leaders, and representatives of traditional communities, the participants developed a set of consensus-based recommendations, including: Creating a Municipal Agriculture Plan with cross-sectoral indicators; strengthening cooperatives and associations in dialogue with the public and private sector; expanding agricultural education for youth; establishing an eco-centre to process local products and support for promoting eco- and rural tourism.

The final Recommendations Letter reaffirmed Bujaru's identity as a hub for sustainable family farming as one of Brazil's leading açai-producing municipalities, and also for environmental preservation. It also positioned the town to align with emerging national and state bioeconomy strategies.

There is evidence that the recommendations on tourism are being carried out, even though the assembly's own language isn't being used by the city hall. There have also been recent efforts to grant formal protected status to the Parque Ambiental do Bom Intento, one of the conservation areas prioritized in the assembly's discussions.

These outcomes illustrate that involving communities from the outset and designing the process with them around their own constraints and needs, allows Indigenous and traditional perspectives can be integrated into policy development.

Source: [Delibera Brasil; delibera.org](https://delibera.org)



CASE STUDY

TÜRKIYE

A CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY FOR LOCAL CLIMATE POLICY

Overview: In 2025, the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality launched Türkiye's first-ever Citizens Assembly for Climate, a landmark initiative that involved residents directly in climate policymaking and set a local precedent for participatory democracy.

The Project: The Assembly was initiated by the NGO Yuva Association, in cooperation with the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality and the local NGO HUDOTO. It was funded by the UNDP and European Union and supported by the European Climate Foundation (ECF) and the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA).

The Steering Committee used innovative methods to introduce the concept to the local community and recruit participants. Instead of mailing out invitations, 50,000 residents were invited by telephone text message (SMS) to take part, with 442 people expressing interest. This methodology was deemed better aligned with local norms of communication and also acted as a cost-saving measure.

From this pool, 50 citizens were selected by random lottery reflecting the city's diversity in terms of age, gender, district, education, occupation, and level of concern about climate change. Together, they explored the question: "How can we survive in a warming Izmir?" The Assembly was scheduled for five full day meetings held every second week.

Mayor Dr. Cemil Tugay opened the first session by encouraging participants to take an active and courageous role: *"Be courageous, comfortable, and free. The success of this Assembly will inspire the creation of new assemblies across Türkiye"*, he said.

Results: A recommendations report will be submitted to the municipality and will be announced publicly. An advisory board consisting of multiple departments from within the municipality has been established to take ownership of the Assembly's recommendations.

Further work is being done to increase the capacity of the Izmir Metropolitan Municipality to act on recommendations and commission future assemblies. Further ways to promote the methodology to other municipalities, authorities and NGOs in Türkiye are also being developed.

Contact: Yuva Association; www.yuva.org.tr/

GEOGRAPHY

Rural communities and urban communities most obviously require different processes for reaching community decisions. City-based projects heavily benefit from the ease of access to venues. This means that participants can reliably take the time to travel to a venue. Comparatively, rural communities may be disparate and require many hour-long drives to reach a suitably central venue for in-person deliberation.

These two situations present dramatically different experiences. It might mean that rural deliberations run on back-to-back days to accommodate the heavy time-investment travelling to and from (and may require additional funding for overnight accommodation for some participants), while urban or suburban communities can have more regular but spread-out in-person meetings. This also reveals a dynamic whereby people have different relationships to others in their community. People in the city often do not know each other, while members of small communities have more local exposure when participating in a public process.

RESOURCES

The size and capacity of your project will be shaped by the resources available. Larger projects are, unsurprisingly, more expensive. However, other resource restrictions might make long-form deliberative projects not possible, including access to skilled facilitation, expert input, and the ability to get a diversity of people in the room for deliberation.

The resource constraints will mean that you will have to choose a method for community input that suits your resource availability.

TOPIC SELECTION

Share the hardest part of the problem. This should motivate your thinking whenever you seek community input on a public decision. Openly describing the task, and specifically discuss what makes it difficult. This helps start the conversation to find a solution. This is different from presenting a possible solution and only receiving feedback on that one option.

Rather than asking people what services they would like, you should frame the question around the difficult task of making trade-off decisions.

When deciding on a topic for a long deliberative process, your focus should be on sharing difficult issues that no one would otherwise touch. This is where you will have the greatest benefit. Problems with contested sources, difficult or complex trade-off choices and issues where the time frame requires long-term thinking are all great sources of topics.

“Can we agree that this is the scope of the remit?” is a question you may face at the outset. If the decision is controversial, you may need to include a process for agreeing on the scope of the project. You will need to consider whether you are prepared to have this conversation. In a situation like this, you may want to ask the participants, “This is the remit, can you live with it?” This will be useful in setting the limits on what the group considers, but with a dramatic change to what happens on Day 1 of a process. Any jurisdictional issues should be resolved by providing clarity and setting expectations about what *can* happen.

POLITICAL AUTHORITY OR MANDATE

The level of authority given to a process impacts the level of commitment shown by the participants. The more people can see that their decisions will have an impact (and not be consumed by bureaucracy), the more seriously they will allocate their own time.

There are varying degrees to which authority can be given to a process. A good response is to give a direct public answer to each recommendation. A clear public record of the participants’ work and the seriousness with which their effort is being taken both affirms their commitment and places enough weight that it cannot be shied away from. Public responses to the recommendations should be a transparent explanation of how the government both understands and plans to implement any recommendations. If, for whatever reason, the government intends to differ from the report, it must make a public explanation for why or face the public criticism of not listening to an informed community decision. Anything short of a commitment to provide a public response runs the risk of being too shallow a commitment.

A better response is to commit to implementing the recommendations. This level of empowerment makes it clear to the group that they do not need to worry about the political feasibility of their recommendations. They can focus on solutions to a hard problem.

The *best* response is to create an institutional role for everyday people in public decision-making. You can find examples of this in Chapter 6.

YOUR BUDGET

How to rapidly determine the approximate cost of a project:

PEOPLE	Design and printing Distribution Advertising Remuneration Travel costs	
FACILITATION	Number facilitators (1-2 per 30 citizens = F Number of process days = D Number of preparation days = P Facilitator cost per day = \$ Total cost = (F x (D+P)) x \$	
INFORMATION	Development and design of information kit Expert speakers Stakeholder involvement	
COMMUNICATIONS	Website Social media Other media	
LOGISTICS	Venue Catering	
EVALUATION	Independent monitor	



Bundestag President Bärbel Bas (pictured), SPD Member of Parliament, draws the members of the first Citizens' Council "Nutrition in Transition" in the citizens' lottery, Germany (2023)
© Deutscher Bundestag / Tobias Koch

Chapter 04

FOR PROJECT OWNERS: KEY DESIGN DECISIONS

“OUR PARLIAMENTARY DEMOCRACY
NEEDS FRESH APPROACHES TO
STRENGTHEN TRUST IN THE
ESTABLISHED INSTITUTIONS.

CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLIES ARE ONE OF
THEM. THEY CREATE SPACE FOR
VERY DIFFERENT PEOPLE TO MEET.
EVERYONE CAN CONTRIBUTE THEIR
PERSONAL VIEWS AND
EXPERIENCES.

THIS DIVERSITY OF OPINION
ENRICHES DEMOCRACY AND
MAKES THE VOICES OF THE
“SILENT MIDDLE” HEARD.”

PRESIDENT OF THE GERMAN BUNDESTAG
2021 - 2025 BÄRBEL BAS

DESIGNING THE PROCESS

Each time you address a challenging political issue with public deliberation, the context will require a unique process design. Some basic features will be present in every project, but often there will be subtle changes to address circumstances specific to the topic, location, or resourcing. Some routine questions help reveal these differences:

- **What specific decision is being made?**
- **What problem are you addressing?**
- **Why is this politically difficult?**
- **How much time do you have?**
- **How large and complex is the topic? (A lot of information will necessitate giving citizens more time.)**
- **What population and which geographic regions are affected by the decision?**
- **Who is the affected community? (Define this broadly)**
- **Who will actively criticise the decision? (Involve these people as stakeholders.)**

Answers to these questions will narrow down the set of viable processes and design decisions that can be made. Have little time? Then you’ll need to be less ambitious with the scope and complexity of the process. Rushing something challenging is a highway to failure.

As a result, some general principles and guidelines can be applied to help define the process parameters. They can help inform how you apply the key elements of stratified random sampling, depth of information, time for deliberation and response timeframes.

The fundamental question, before considering any of the core elements, is whether or not the issue that is to be addressed is appropriate for citizens’ assembly-style deliberation. **Ideal topics or issues focus on resolving trade-offs** that require people to deliberate and form a common ground view on how to address the issue.

This means that questions that focus on things like “*What is a fair way to distribute the costs and benefits?*” are the focus of a well-aimed project. Applying ‘fairness’ to specific topics requires members of a community to stand behind and justify the decisions they have made to other community members.

Take some time to think of some public decisions in your community. Some starter questions should be:

- What trade-offs exist in the decision?
- Who is the affected community? Make sure you think broadly here. For example, the community impacted by a decision on public housing will include those who are tenants, those who are on a waitlist, and the wider community who contribute resources to provide the housing.
- What makes the decision difficult? This will be useful in framing the question that citizens are asked to respond to.

WEIGHING UP SUBJECTIVE PROCESS DESIGN OPTIONS

Context isn't the only factor that will shape your process design. **There will be points where you need to make subjective decisions between design options. This is why process design documents should be publicised.** For example, what participant selection quotas should you use? There are many different ways to divide a population into a roughly representative sample, but which way is the right way? Well, it depends on your assessment as to which will best deliver the desired outcomes.

What are the overall goals?

1. LEGITIMACY

The community needs to see themselves and their interests represented in the room.

2. EFFECTIVENESS

The recommendations need to be well-informed, well-reasoned, and implementable.

3. INTEGRITY

The process needs to be fair and well trusted.

We don't yet have a formula that can construct process designs that perfectly balance subjective decisions and key outcomes.

For example, if two design decisions are in tension but they both serve key outcomes in some way, which is better?

This is something you'll need to do by weighing up pros and cons of different design decisions in negotiation with stakeholders and

deliberative engagement experts (if in doubt, always phone a friend).

Three things to keep in mind throughout your process design phase:

- Will this improve or decrease the legitimacy of the process?
- Will this make the outputs more or less effective and impactful?
- How might someone manipulate this process?

Proactively addressing these features will help you find a balance between building trust, running an impactful process, and avoiding opportunities for people to break or manipulate your process. Sometimes, you might design something with good intentions only to realise that someone could take advantage of the loophole you've just created.

For example, sometimes citizens' assemblies set specific quotas to make sure people from underrepresented groups are included. But these groups often respond to invitations at much lower rates. As a result, anyone from those groups who does respond has a much higher chance of being selected because the organizers need them to meet the quota. This can unintentionally encourage people acting in bad faith to misreport their demographic information to get a spot.

To address this risk, you might consider ways to reliably and fairly verify people's reported features, or how you could include or represent those perspectives or voices in the process in a different, more robust way.

Another example is trying to filter information to only that which is 'unbiased.' **The act of filtering likely contains some bias and definitely creates grounds for the wider community assuming that some unwanted views or arguments are being excluded.**

To address this risk, you will want to ensure that participants learn broadly about the issue so that they can readily discern between disinformation and facts as a group.



CASE STUDY

REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA

COVID-19 HEALTHCARE RESPONSE

Overview: During Covid, a random selection of citizens in the Republic of North Macedonia, equally represented by those not planning to take the vaccine and those who were, met online for ten full days to find common ground on the question of: “What can we do to prevent a resurgence of COVID-19 cases?”

The Project: In this project, that reported directly to the Minister for Health, the Assembly used discussion and evidence to examine whether the limits on gatherings during the pandemic were acceptable.

The Result: The Assembly’s eight-page, self-written report made 17 recommendations.

The first being: *“The recommendation respects the right of citizens who do not wish to be vaccinated, as this is a personal choice, while restrictive measures should apply equally to everyone. The Ministry of Health should run a campaign to encourage even those who are hesitant to get vaccinated. The state should take measures to address such cases.”*

Public opinion encourages extreme public comment responses, while in a citizens’ assembly format, the discussion moved to one of evidence and one where people with different views had time to explore this with one another and find common ground as a group.

Contact: Zip Institute. www.zipinstitute.mk

DEFINING SUCCESS

There are many metrics for measuring the success of different aspects of the deliberative process. The single most comprehensive measure is whether or not assembly members are willing to publicly endorse their work alongside commissioning leaders.

When people from all walks of life are willing to publicly stand behind the recommendations they wrote themselves—addressing a given problem with clear intent and sound reasoning—those outside the process can see its fairness. They can see that someone like them helped shape the public decision.

Your process design decisions relate directly to achieving this outcome. Are the right people in the room? Do they have a clear problem to solve over which they have a meaningful opportunity to influence the final decision? Were they well informed by a balance of viewpoints? Did they find common ground in a way that they can all stand behind? Keep these questions in mind as you make your design decisions.

There are many other benchmarks for tracking the success of specific moments in the process, such as whether people learn enough information, whether the share of voice between participants is fair, whether people felt free from external influence, and more. These more granular details are addressed in the following two chapters.

We will now step through your **seven main decision points** as you create a process design.

What do people need to know to make an informed decision? How many experts, interest groups, and perspectives will they need to consider to reach a widely trusted decision? These two questions will help you quickly see the time your process needs.

The single most comprehensive measure is whether or not assembly members are willing to publicly endorse their work alongside commissioning leaders.



CASE STUDY

CANADA, BRITISH COLUMBIA

PREVENTING DRUG HARM

Overview: The province of British Columbia continues to face a serious toxic drug crisis, and postsecondary institutions, including those with large youth populations, have been heavily affected. In January 2024, when a student at the University of Victoria (UVic) took a fatal dose of drugs in a university dorm room, it galvanized significant attention from different stakeholders to improve UVic and other universities' policies and practices.

The Project: A Students' Assembly of 26 participants was formed as part of a larger process to gather input for a new 'Substance Use Health Strategy: A Whole-of-Campus Approach to Safety and Wellbeing. The Assembly deliberated for 18 hours over the question: How can UVic prevent potential harms to students related to the toxic drug supply?

The assembly participants advanced 15 Core Recommendations (which had over 80% support from participants) and four Supplementary Recommendations (which had between 50-80% support from participants).

During the deliberations, students showed a strong ability to consider tradeoffs thoughtfully. One example was the discussion about whether harm reduction training should be mandatory for all incoming students or strongly recommended. Participants noted that mandatory training might not always support effective learning, could be challenging to administer, and would compete with other important training topics that are not currently required.

The Result: These discussions shaped their main recommendation: to add a harm reduction module to the digital student learning platform, Brightspace. The proposed module would include training on harm reduction, AED use, naloxone, and available supports, with videos, resource links, and a completion badge. Several of the student-led recommendations also influenced the final decisions contained in the report. For example, their recommendation to *"Create a campus-wide network of student harm reduction representatives"* is incorporated as a long-term outcome in the Substance Use Health Strategy in this way: *"Peer support networks or ambassadors are accessible and visible across campus, increasing relatability, reducing stigma, and promoting a culture of shared care and safety."*

Source: Simon Pek, University of Victoria, Canada: [Understanding and Developing Deliberative Approaches to University Governance](https://srhe.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Kennedy_Pek_Report.pdf) https://srhe.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/Kennedy_Pek_Report.pdf



Citizens' Assembly members focused on local climate resilience and sustainable development in traditional communities in Bujaru, Para state, Brazil (2024) © Marina Lim. Supplied by Silvia Cervellini.

INFORMATION DEPTH AND TOPIC COMPLEXITY

People begin deliberative processes with very different amounts of relevant knowledge. The goal is to provide them all with as much context as possible, including things like background information, subject matter fundamentals, relevant considerations, trade-offs, and possible options and then support them to efficiently and effectively learn this information, so that they can actively apply their learnings in the process.

People learn at different rates and in different ways. We'll cover specific methodologies later in this handbook, but this is something that you should keep in mind throughout the information curation process.

From a process design perspective, what is important to understand is the complexity of the subject. Will it require an extended learning phase, hands-on learning in some way, or are the consequences of decisions complex and require careful modelling? If you found yourself nodding your head to any of these questions, then they might require you to think about providing more time for the learning phase or between the development of draft recommendations and finalising them.

What do citizens need to read and question to make an informed recommendation?

Remember, we are not asking participants to become aeronautical engineers. We are asking them to make values trade-offs between the benefits and externalities of comfortable, efficient, or cheap flight.

Your subject matter complexity directly links to how much time you need to schedule for your process, and who you need participating in a Stakeholder Reference Group.

TIME AND SCOPE

Time and scope are related factors. A change to one will necessitate re-evaluating the other.

Time is going to be the factor that most shapes what type of process you use to involve the community in public decisions. If you do not have much time, you should opt for a short turnaround survey or online engagement that gives you as much useful information as possible within the timeframe. With a little more time, you should make use of a wider community engagement model, where you can produce some background information that shares the problem and seeks community feedback on possible options and priorities. With even more time, you can look to longer form deliberations that involve everyday members of the community over a few months such as citizens' assemblies.

What is the key difference between these forms of community engagement? With more time, people are able to become increasingly more informed about the issue, consider the perspectives of others, and the consequences of decisions they might want to make. Therefore, each of these options should come with different expectations.

There is little point in asking people what they think about complex policy trade-offs when they have not been given the time and access to information to make informed contributions. (One setting where it does make sense is when you're looking to gauge what their actions might be when in the voting booth, hence public opinion polling.) In this context, "informed" doesn't imply that if only people knew more, then they would make the "right" decision. Rather, it means the depth of the task can reasonably be understood and engaged with.

Instead, a survey can ask people for information that they already possess: their hopes, their concerns, the questions they would

like answered, information that they think those making decisions should consider. These questions help build buy-in to the eventual decision by ensuring that the process addresses the needs and priorities of people who are not more deeply involved. They also do not rush people to a decision, which they are not well prepared to make and which might set the wrong expectations.

Ideally, each of these options can be combined into a sequence much like a funnel. A survey might gather information, a deeper public discussion process might reveal potential options and deeper-held concerns, helping prioritise parts of the problem, and a citizens' assembly might resolve differences and determine the trade-offs everyone can live with.

HOW DO TIME AND SCOPE INTERACT?

With not much time, the scope will need to be reduced. With a large scope, we need more time.

Attempting to tackle the tax code for a country in four days will not work. There isn't enough time for people to understand all of the moving parts, let alone make complex decisions that have a myriad of downstream implications. There are two options: *one* is to find more time and expand the process out to eight or more days with large gaps in between key steps for economic modelling, and the other is to reduce the scope to address one particular tax. These approaches maximise the likelihood of the assembly completing its task in the given time (which is different to maximising the process's impact on the problem; in an ideal process, these are aligned).

HOW MUCH TIME IN TOTAL?

Typically, citizens' assemblies take around six to nine months to deliver from beginning to end. The beginning is when the official decision is made to host the process, and all the required planning and project management gets underway. The conclusion in this timeline is when the final day of deliberation concludes and the recommendations are delivered to the commissioning authority. This isn't necessarily the "end" of the process— you will still need to publicly respond in some way, and the actual implementation of policy recommendations can take years.

HOW MANY HOURS OF DELIBERATION OVER HOW MANY DAYS?

As a guide, start from the idea that people need roughly 40 hours in person, meeting four to six times to meaningfully deliberate and find common ground without feeling pushed toward a pre-ordained outcome. Some topics will be less complex than others, making them more suitable for shorter lengths of deliberation. Complexity can be managed by altering the scope.

People will benefit from the time between sessions to absorb information (two to three weeks works well). Process organisers will relish the time between sessions as it allows them to source additional information requests, book additional expert speakers, and respond to anything that emerges through the project.

HOW LONG ARE THE DAYS?

What is normal where you live? Days are roughly the length of a working day. This depends on what is possible, how many meetings are happening and what content is being covered. It is common to have a weekday evening ‘meet-and-greet’ session where participants meet one another, the facilitators, and the commissioning authority before stepping into full-day sessions for the rest of the process.

What matters here is that participants have enough time face-to-face to ask a lot of questions, receive and think about answers, discuss things with experts (some of whom they choose), explore information, form recommendations, and write their report. This means that a process could have three three-hour sessions and three eight-hour sessions and still find the right balance between information exploration, deliberation, and recommendation forming. **The important factor is that citizens feel sufficiently informed and have had enough of a chance to discuss it that they ‘own’ the decision.**

WHAT IF THEY NEED LONGER?

It is a certainty that assembly members will wish for more time. As they learn more about an issue, they tend to think that even more information will eventually reveal a better answer. A good process design will allow enough time for learning before guiding the group through the phase of finding common ground on solutions.

It is, however, not uncommon that, at the end of a project, the participants will genuinely need more time. This happens when participants feel a significant commitment to the quality of their output but have run out of available time or when deliberations have been slow and more challenging than anticipated.

Adding additional sessions to a project can be difficult because of the inflexibility of deadlines.

One approach is to ensure that the participants form basic recommendations on the most crucial aspects of their remit before the close of the second last scheduled session. This then gives them the ability to schedule another session that suits as many people as possible (while not being too far disjointed from the final session). It is crucial that as many people attend additional sessions as possible, and that this is noted alongside any additional recommendations, because it is a clear differentiation in the process for how the two sets of recommendations are made. An approach here can be to schedule two short sessions with the aim of the whole group attending at least one of the two meetings.

Another option here is to schedule optional sessions between the final two sessions to allow groups to work together to further develop their work. This should not be the default way of developing recommendations, but a release valve for people to put some extra hours into progressing something that has the support of the wider group.

THE BOTTOM LINE.

Different forms of deliberation can reduce the time frame from start to finish. Different contexts will sometimes make this preferable, such as when the decision must be made quickly and where there is widespread agreement that the pool of potential answers is limited. In this case, some deliberation is better than none.

Ultimately, time should not be compromised on.

Processes and decisions that are designed around long periods of in-person deliberation heavily require the full commitment of time. Reducing the time allowed leads to rushed decisions and undermines the trust-building between decision-makers, participants and the wider public.

THE REMIT OR “THE QUESTION”

One of your most consequential decisions, the remit, focuses the group on its task and is the public facing description of the purpose of the process. It should simultaneously focus on revealing the key trade-off(s) involved to maximise impact while also conveying to the wider public that this is an important and consequential process worthy of their time.

You need to focus people on the task at hand rather than a general “have your say” or comment on the problem. Even at a simple online engagement level, you should still pose specific questions to the community to get feedback on an issue. These questions should match the type of engagement you’re undertaking. Surveys and online feedback should not ask complex questions about an issue that requires a lot of background reading to properly answer. Instead, survey questions should aim to draw out values and priorities without asking simple yes/ no or direct questions. The most valuable feedback is why the community wants something.

Having decided that an issue requires a deep level of citizen deliberation and involvement in the decision, the next step is deciding on the right way to write the question. When framing this inquiry, question or remit, the chosen words need to be broad in order to be open to a range of possible solutions, but not so broad that participants are side-tracked into irrelevant discussions. If it is too narrow, it will confine the group’s thinking and the group will, understandably, demand explanations-why are we confined to this or that? If too broad, the group risks attempting to cover too much or distracting themselves with side questions. Broadness can be addressed downstream with facilitation and intervention, but that requires nuance and can raise questions about the integrity of the process. It’s best to start off from the right place.

You should start with your problem definition.

- What is the problem you are trying to solve?
- You may be weighing up changing bus fares, but why? Is the fundamental problem the price of bus fares for certain demographics, reducing the number of cars on the road, or the financing for public transport?
- What solution do you need from assembly members?
- What answers will be most useful?

Your focus here is to be clear about what problem you are trying to solve. You can then build a question that focuses on this problem rather than trying to come up with a ‘nice’ sounding question without a purpose.

A template to start with is: “How should we X?”

This clear statement poses a challenge to the assembly. It is over to them to determine the considerations at hand and how to balance them. Sometimes, you might already be doing something and want to revisit certain trade-offs, such as balancing the budget for your municipality.

How Should We Balance the City Budget?

What services are we prepared to pay for?

Each of these questions clearly presents a problem to be solved, and one that is relevant to most people receiving the random invitation to participate. They are also very easy to understand.

It’s not necessary to embed all constraints and trade-offs into the question. If you’re deliberately narrowing the scope, then that should be reflected in the wording to avoid mission creep. If there are natural constraints such as costs, jurisdiction, or timeframes, then those can be explained and justified throughout the process.

You don’t want a wordy and caveat-ridden remit. Confusion and ambiguity must be avoided, and **language kept simple**. Test it yourself: how could this be answered ‘off-topic’? A good remit passes the “barista test”—any regular person making or sharing a coffee can hear it and understand exactly what is required and what the focus is. Consider how different members of your family, over different generations, would react.

Remits should be open. This gives citizens the freedom to have their say rather than be boxed in. The more information the commissioning authority can elicit from an informed and deliberative group of citizens, the more valuable the processes are more to everyone. Open questions that allow participants to consider creative or aspirational answers tend to be more useful than narrow questions. For example, two different remits on the same topic:

Should we build a second airport?

or

How should we meet our air travel needs?

The first remit narrows the task to a yes or no decision on a second airport. The second remit includes any considerations of a second airport within other recommendations on air travel more generally. With the second remit, the participants will likely make recommendations on the need for a second airport, but they are also given the room to make recommendations on all manner of air travel decisions. This is more useful for everyone involved as it neither constrains the community's involvement in the problem nor limits the extent of valuable advice they can provide to decision-makers.

A good remit saves time; a poor remit can be saved with extra time. This example is from a project with a limited time that necessitated a focused remit.

The Government is drafting a Gender Equality Bill and setting quotas for public sector organisations is a key. What gender equality quotas are fair? How can they be best implemented?

Remits sometimes benefit from a simple statement to set the scene and give the reader some context. In this case, clearly stating that the Government has decided that a Gender Equality Bill is being developed draws the discussion away from 'should we have a Gender Equality Bill?' and focuses it on the decisions that are still needed.

CIVIC LOTTERY – WHO SHOULD BE IN THE ROOM?

A lot of people use the term 'minipublic' to describe citizens' assemblies. The term indicates an assembly that is a population-in-miniature, as assembly members will 'stand in' for a much larger population. The aim is to satisfy an important democratic principle: representativeness.

This equal democratic opportunity to be selected matches the equal democratic opportunity to be heard on a public decision.



CASE STUDY

SWITZERLAND

AN ASSEMBLY BY YOUTH FOR YOUTH

Overview: Recognizing that action was needed to boost youth involvement in decision-making, particularly on issues that directly impacted youth, a national assembly was organized. The topics to be tackled were to be determined by young people.

The Project: The Future Council U24 was the first national citizen assembly for young people in Switzerland. Using a democratic lottery and an official address sample from the Federal Statistical Office, 20,000 young people were contacted to be involved. The response rate of 6% to participate was remarkably high compared to other citizen assemblies. This interest was boosted by the participatory topic selection process: 739 young people submitted ideas in an open call, and over 1,000 voted on the final topic: mental health.

80 participants from all linguistic regions and diverse backgrounds were selected to take part demonstrating that even 'politically disengaged youth' are willing to engage in democratic processes when invited respectfully and transparently.

The results: The project addressed the youth mental health crisis exacerbated by COVID-19 and a lack of youth inclusion in policymaking. It closed this democratic gap by placing young people at the centre of the debate. The process was deliberative, based on principles of inclusion, balanced information, and facilitated dialogue. Participants developed 33 recommendations; 18 of which reached the required approval threshold and were officially adopted. The recommendations were presented in early 2024 to representatives of the federal executive and legislative branches, as well as to a broad alliance of civil society organizations. The recommendations now serve as a shared point of reference for future policy on youth mental health.

Source: Profuturis Swiss Society For The Common Good; profuturis.ch/de

Indeed, those having a say, will likely feel more heard by a jury of their peers than by traditional institutional structures.

Representativeness refers to the involvement of the community in decisions that affect them. This draws on political principles such as personal autonomy and political equality. However, we can't fit the entire community into the room for each public decision. We need to find a way to legitimately represent the interests of the community.

We can put ourselves in the shoes of people not in the room who might be thinking: *"Is someone like me a part of the decision?"* Or *"Will my interests be represented in the process?"* In ad-hoc processes like citizens' assemblies, this is best achieved through stratified random selection, also known as a civic lottery.

A civic lottery is where you have criteria for who needs to be in the room, and you randomly select people to meet those targets. For example, if I require half the room to be made up of women participants, then one of the criteria for the final makeup of the assembly is that half the people should be women.

Now picture this, but with criteria for age, gender, location and education. You can see how we're constructing a population-in-miniature.

You need to think about exactly who you involve. Surveys and online engagements generally want to hear from as many people as possible. There are some occasions where you might want to hear from a specific part of the community on a topic that impacts them uniquely (think location-specific decisions or youth advice on a problem that impacts them more than others). You can always ask demographic questions when surveying people and apply demographically weighted analysis tools to reweigh your responses.

A degree of self-selection still occurs with the stratified random selection in a civic lottery because potential participants are free to decide whether or not to accept an invitation to participate (unless somehow participation is compulsory). **Despite that, the cross-section of any community drawn in this way is much more diverse and reflective of the wider population than would occur through an open call for participation (an opportunity typically taken up by those with the resources and interest).** This also makes for a process less open to influence from special interests. You will mostly reach people you've never seen before.

Selection processes do not need to make claims of being a perfect statistical match (compared to a public opinion poll). You should instead aim to achieve a descriptive match to the population to satisfy the "people like me" principle, something that you can consistently achieve with groups of 30-50 people.

This group size is large enough to capture a *descriptive* diversity while also being manageably small enough so that the facilitation task does not become too complex. **You should resist the tendency to equate size with legitimacy.** More people might mean more diversity in the room, but it also makes it harder for the facilitator to get people to deliberate and find common ground. Reaching common ground between 300 people is much more difficult than with 30 people. And if you're one of 30 people, you tend to take more responsibility for your role than in a large group where you can hide.

Balancing the right number of people in the room is a trade-off between a few related variables:

- **Budget:** Having more people requires more money (catering, reimbursements, size of venue, number of facilitators, etc.)
- **Inclusion:** Having more people allows for the representation of more diverse perspectives.
- **Deliberation:** Having too many people makes it more difficult to surface and synthesise the views in the room.
- **Incentives:** Having too many people decreases the incentives for individual people to shoulder responsibility and participate fully.
- **Scale:** Having more people can increase the perceived legitimacy of the process for more controversial or important decisions.

We can't maximise all of these features at the same time because some are in opposition to each other. You'll need to weigh these up and make a decision as to what balance is right for your project and your community.

BUDGET

This is a hard reality of the project. With a fixed budget, you'll need to judge whether paying for extra people to be in the room (catering, recruitment, reimbursements, venue size, number of facilitators) is worth the benefits (inclusion, legitimacy, scale). Sometimes this decision is already made for you, and the budget can only accommodate the minimum number of people for viability, usually around 24 people.

INCLUSION

Populations are complex, and many people are impacted by decisions in different ways. There are only so many combinations of people that can be precisely represented in a 30-person assembly. If you have a large or complex issue, you might need to include more people to be sure that you can include the right diversity of voices.

Simple demographic filters such as age, gender, location, and education (or sometimes home ownership, as a surrogate socio-economic status indicator) are commonly used to help stratify the random sample to represent the broader community. You can use more filters, but a balance is required. Over-engineering who is in the room can lead to accusations of 'fixing' or having too much control over the 'random' nature of a civic lottery. At worst, actively excluding people from the process will undermine trust in the process.

With this method, you are not trying to fit every single 'type' of person into the room. This would mean bringing everyone in the community into the room for each meeting. Instead, we aim to construct a group that is fairly selected with no sign of manipulation, and is seen as legitimate.

What simple characteristics will lead most people to see someone like them involved?

The demographic filters that are included are important. The above simple filters are recommended to achieve a broad descriptive representation. This is because other types of representation are taken into consideration through the design process, so that strictly who is or is not in the room as a participant is not the only form of representation.

Consider the question: What is the best way to represent the views of a minority interest?

With a group of 30 people, minority voices will likely be small (much like they are in the wider community).

One option is to increase their stratification quotas for members of those communities. We'd need to find a way to stratify by their characteristics or viewpoints and ensure people didn't abuse it.

Another option is to include them in a stakeholder group, overemphasise their role in the wider community engagement or include them as subject matter experts in the information phase to ensure that their concerns and considerations are meaningfully considered. This would have the added benefit of not burdening an individual to be the sole representative of what are often complex communities.

For example, a nationwide decision in Australia on taxes will need to include representatives from each of the States and Territories, but if we're to do this proportionally, then the Northern Territory would have 1 representative out of 105, and New South Wales would have 33. Some might view this as unfair, but if we weigh in here and start rebalancing these numbers, we would need a good, principled reason for doing so and be able to justify that to anyone who asks.

One reason might be to safeguard the interests of each state and territory to ensure that people from those states see that the process and final decisions are fair and legitimate. To do this, we could introduce a floor of 5 places and then proportionally allocate the rest. This naturally "takes" places from larger states first but is otherwise fair given that condition.

So far, we've only discussed more physical demographics, but you might want to proportionally represent viewpoints. For example, it's common for assemblies on the topic of climate change to ensure that people with a range of views on the issue are selected. This aims to build legitimacy by addressing concerns that any one viewpoint is disproportionately represented.

Other examples where traditional demographics might not capture the right cross-section of the community, and you need discursive criteria instead, include distinguishing between individual responsibility vs. structural causes in health outcomes,

or Libertarian vs. Communitarian approaches to pandemic responses.

Another thing to consider is the differential treatment of those more acutely impacted by any decision. Who should be involved in the decision if some stand to lose or gain more than others? This is a political question that cannot be resolved by process design experts. But some advice:

- Remember our overall design goals: legitimacy, effectiveness, and integrity.
- Is membership of the assembly the only way to reweight these interests?
- Is it important that the whole community is making this decision together?

There is no right or wrong answer, but there are pros and cons. Reweighting seat allocations might help ameliorate concerns about being treated unfairly, but this might undermine the wider public's view of the legitimacy and integrity of the process. Tread carefully.

DELIBERATION

The bigger the group, the harder it is to work together. While there are ways to improve the effectiveness of working with large groups of people, they only work up to a point.

In small groups, everyone learns each other's names, facial cues, and speaking styles. As numbers grow, anonymity creeps in, and participants may feel less accountable for their contributions. Larger groups, therefore, require more focus on preventing fragmentation, where discussion often breaks into private asides or dominant-subgroup exchanges, excluding quieter members.

Large groups also introduce more time constraints. Speaking time allocation becomes a zero-sum problem: the more people, the less depth each can go into. Some structured exercises, like ranking or voting, take disproportionately longer to run.

Typically, these challenges are addressed by combining small-group deliberation with larger plenary synthesis exercises. For example, a 50-person assembly might subdivide into 10 groups of 5 for a brainstorming session and then report back in plenary (everyone in a big group) to share findings and merge ideas. This

approach gets the benefits of deep deliberation in small groups and then uses plenary discussions to build a shared understanding.

What would that process look like with 300 people? Would you run 60 groups of 5? How long would it take for 60 groups to share their 2-minute summary? 2 hours? You can see the problem.

One way of addressing this is to create "satellite" groups. You might split the 300-person assembly into three assemblies on different themes. This introduces a whole other can of worms, including questions such as how do you select who is in which assembly, how themes are determined, and what is the process for synthesising and building shared understandings across assemblies? As usual, remember the overall goals, and if in doubt, ask for help.

INCENTIVES

Group size has two direct impacts on the incentive to participate. First, individuals exert less effort when their contribution is less visible. Second, the larger the group, the smaller each person's share of decision-making power. The first impact can result in unequal participation, also known as free-riding or social loafing, but the second can also lead to people feeling their input "won't change the outcome," and they may withdraw or contribute less thoughtfully.

This is bad because citizens' assemblies are usually tackling important public issues and can't afford to have people disengaging. People are representatives of their wider community and have a civic responsibility to contribute, but the responsibility also lies with process organisers to design processes that enable or encourage these contributions.

Additionally, we rely on incentives to encourage participation. Demonstrating a meaningful influence over the outcome is one way of showing people who are typically sceptical about government engagement that their contributions will be worth the time and effort.

SCALE

The scale of the process is heavily linked to the number of participants. We've just mentioned the difficulty of managing a 300-person process, but what if the decision covers such a broad area that representation nearly necessitates such a large process?

Is the process for a local municipality or a big regional government? Decisions that cover broad geographic distances or areas that have acutely different experiences of a policy problem may warrant two (or more) separate processes.

An example of this is a process on the topic of infrastructure planning across an entire state with a large capital city, other smaller regional towns, and large rural areas. The process featured two distinct citizens' assemblies, one for the metropolitan region and one for the regional. Two different assemblies allowed the government to get informed recommendations that were heavily situated in their geographic contexts, which goes to the 'people like me' criterion.

National conversations will almost always include more than one group of participants. This is critical for capturing the experiences and descriptiveness of the entire country. How many groups, and where, will depend on the problem and the way it is experienced differently across a state or country.

Scale can be a way of diversifying the geographic voices in the room. This is important for large decisions, but is sometimes not necessary when the type of decision does not evoke experiences that would not heavily differ from one community to the next. This is not to say that all communities are the same, but that regional or state-wide decisions on planning and energy may speak to different experiences and therefore require different types of scaling.

In terms of exactly how to scale, you should first think about the total area or number of people impacted by a decision. Their geographic or experience diversity will help inform whether you need to facilitate groups apart from one another before bringing them together for deliberation. Some examples of what this might look like include:

- **A large metropolitan city requires a broad strategic plan for its future growth.** The city has 3 distinct regions or areas within it, and these are clear experiential markers for levels of current and future growth. You may want to run groups of 30 participants in each of these areas individually, before bringing all three groups together for deliberations that combine the outcomes of each of the distinct groups.
- **A statewide decision needs to be made on energy production.** Electricity production impacts different parts of the state in different ways, and so it is important that those from rural or regional areas have an input as well as populate metropolitan centres. You might want to identify key regions of the state that have distinctly different life experiences (i.e. metro, rural, regional). These different groups would meet on their own before feeding into a combined deliberation. This ensures discussions are held all around the state, participants do not regularly need to travel far, and ultimately, a considered response can reflect the statewide experience.

EXCLUSIONS

Should *anyone* be excluded from the discussion? We make one exception here: we suggest that anyone who is in paid political employment, political office, or actively involved in the decision from within government, be ineligible for participation.

This goes to public trust and the integrity of the process. Those in political positions can make their cases to the assembly, but not from within the assembly. This is the difference between being an expert speaker and an assembly member.

You might be tempted to remove those who might benefit substantially from a particular decision. For example, an assembly is addressing the insurance regime for motor vehicles--changes that might result from this process could impact the insurance industry, lawyers, and vehicle manufacturers. Should we exclude these people from the process? What about anyone with a tangential relationship or interest? You can quickly see how developing a principled rule here is difficult and can look like you're actively excluding certain stakeholders and not others.

The solution to these concerns lies in the assembly process itself. Assembly members hear from a range of perspectives and apply critical thinking to the available information to develop group

decisions. No single participant or information source can unduly influence the process without convincing their peers of the merit and soundness of their points. Facilitation will also typically encourage people to ask themselves what voices are not in the room and should be included, and to reflect on how different measures may affect a wide range of people in the community.

Another common question: Are citizens’ assemblies limited to only citizens? The answer varies. For the most part, community engagement traditionally involves residents. However, some national-level decisions of significant consequence might be might not be appropriate for non-citizens. This is a subjective decision that you’ll need to make in keeping with your local democratic context and principles. Show your thinking in the process design document and make that public.



Assembléia Cidadã Bujaru (2024) ©Michel Ribeiro.
Supplied by Silvia Cervellini



CASE STUDY

IRELAND

YOUNG PEOPLE TACKLE BIODIVERSITY LOSS

Overview: The 2022 Children and Young People’s Assembly on Biodiversity Loss in Ireland was commissioned by the Minister responsible for biodiversity loss in Ireland, independent of an adult citizens’ assembly taking place on the same theme. Recognizing that the biodiversity crisis is a child rights crisis, and under the obligations of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (which Ireland has ratified), it was determined that young people under 18 had the right to have their say on the matter.

The Project: The Assembly was co-designed with a team of nine Young Advisors aged 8-16, who helped ensure the content, information, and learning experience for the members was accessible, appropriate, fun, and creative. We used a range of participatory, creative, and nature-based methods to ensure the Assembly members, who were a range of ages (7-17) and from a range of backgrounds and with mixed abilities, could participate. Working with practitioners with child rights, education, safeguarding and participation experience was essential to ensuring the process was meaningful, inclusive and impactful.

“I learned that we have the right to get involved in things like biodiversity assemblies. I didn’t think children did that.” – Assembly member, Age 8, Ireland

To make sure that Assembly members were not overwhelmed, the children and young people were placed into one of five mixed-age theme groups. Each theme group specialised in a key driver of biodiversity loss. Each Assembly member was also placed in what

we called a ‘Family Group’ with children of approximately the same age. The purpose of Family Groups was to enable the children and young people to connect with others of the same age and receive age-appropriate wellbeing support throughout the Assembly process. Our “Young Advisors” were also included as participants in the groups rather than co-facilitators. Regular Family Group check-ins and team- building activities took place across the two Assembly weekends.

“The participative process that they designed is, I believe, replicable across all areas of public policy where the views of children and young people are sought. We should be doing much more of this. To say that they had an impact on public policy making would be an understatement.” – Malcolm Noonan T.D., Minister of State for Nature, Heritage and Electoral Reform–Ireland

The Results: The Assembly concluded with its members creating a vision statement, six key messages, and 58 calls to action, published in a report, film, and poster. These were presented to the government minister responsible for biodiversity in Ireland. They also presented their calls to action to the adults’ Citizens’ Assembly, and to the Irish Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Environment and Climate Action. The Irish Government committed to implementing 55 of the 58 calls to action (in its official response), including creating a Children and Young People’s Biodiversity Forum which will make sure children and young people can continue to have a say in biodiversity policy-making in Ireland, and be part of biodiversity conservation efforts through the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Source: [Child Rights International Network](#); [home.crin.org](#)

Another common question: What age limit should we place on participation? The answer again varies. For many processes, the default will be the voting age, but we’re increasingly seeing places experiment by including younger people in the deliberation process, or by experimenting with processes exclusively for young people and integrating their contributions into an adult citizens’ assembly. See for example, the case study from Ireland’s Children and Young People’s Assembly on Biodiversity Loss.

DEFINING THE ROLE FOR STAKEHOLDERS AND ACTIVE INTERESTS

There are two distinct groups of people when it comes to running a citizens’ assembly. Those people selected to be assembly members or “in the room,” and everyone else.

The people in the room go on a very unique journey, which can be opaque to anyone on the outside. A good process will find ways to include those not in the room to contribute at key points and otherwise have a window into the experience of the deliberative journey.

Some people will be more acutely impacted by a decision. They might benefit significantly, or they might pay additional costs. As a starting point, think of those who might be the subject of any decision, those working in impacted sectors and anyone who might subsequently feel flow-on effects.

These stakeholders will have an active interest in the process from the outset. You will need to carefully balance their involvement such that they buy into the process and contribute to its successful implementation without allowing them to inappropriately influence the outcome in a specific way.

We find that stakeholders often *prefer* to make their case to representative groups of everyday people freed from the constraints of elected officials. Such a group can evaluate the merits of different sides to an issue and make a balanced decision.

If you do not have a clear picture of who the key stakeholders are, you should do some basic stakeholder mapping to ensure that you’ve covered all of the diverse interests and not just those with the loudest mouthpiece.

There are three common ways of including stakeholders in the process:

1. Oversight
2. Content submissions
3. Speaking

To address all stakeholders equally and better facilitate their involvement, it’s common practice to establish some form of stakeholder reference group (SRG).

Stakeholders must have a genuine opportunity (often through multiple formats) to make their case to the assembly.

The most common approaches to stakeholder involvement include:

- Drafting submissions to the background information document
- Recommending lists of speakers with important knowledge or perspectives
- Providing expert testimony and answering participant questions.
- Evaluating recommendations

To build trust in the process, you might provide the SRG with an early briefing to enable them to understand how the process will work and check for any issues. Provide them with the draft process design and ask: Can they spot any flaws? Is there anything that they’re concerned about? What questions do they have? Addressing these before you’re underway (before there are

substantive points of difference related to outputs and not process) will help build buy-in. You will find that some of your stakeholders become your biggest supporters.

The SRG might review or even develop the initial list of expert speakers to help with balance and fairness. Pose the challenge to them: “We have room for 6 speakers in this session. Who do they need to hear from, and what is a fair balance between all the different perspectives?” This asks the group to find agreement between themselves, mediating any undue influence and building broad support for the fairness of the process.

You should also always make space for stakeholders to attend deliberations as observers, not to interrupt or interfere with citizens’ deliberations, but to observe the robustness of the process.

A truly successful process is one in which not just citizens, but policy-makers and even polarised stakeholders with very different points of view can say, “we respect the process, we can see the assembly has considered all perspectives, and we accept their decisions.”

THE WIDER COMMUNITY

A citizens’ assembly isn’t limited to thinking about only those selected to be in the room. We want people to be able to make constructive contributions even if they aren’t selected, and we want people to see the process as legitimate by being open to outside input.

The challenge is that constructive contributions are those that don’t rush to a decision. The entire point of the exercise is to give a small group of people the opportunity to learn and deliberate together. Asking uninformed or minimally informed non-participants “What should we do?” is not helpful. Instead, you can ask them to contribute things that don’t require them to develop more complex understandings of the issue, things like their hopes for the future, their concerns about the future, the questions they would like to see answered in the process, and information that they think should be considered when making decisions. These questions help build buy-in to the eventual decision by ensuring that the process addresses the needs of people who are not more deeply involved.



Small group dialogues during the Citizens' Assembly in Zviahel, Ukraine.

Consider this point for yourself and different personas in your community: What would the process need to do for me to be satisfied with its legitimacy, quality and integrity?

How will you ensure that different kinds of people are satisfied that the process will address their needs and concerns?

You might consider:

- Surveying them for their hopes, concerns, questions, and information sources
- Developing a communications plan to bring them along the deliberative journey
- Allowing them to observe the process in person
- Applying technology to allow them to explore the deliberative journey

Remember, best practice will involve notifying all these people of opportunities to see the citizens’ assembly in action, sharing the government report and presenting the government response to the people.

USING TECHNOLOGY: OFFLINE OR ONLINE

For the most part, deliberation is better done in person.

We're social animals and we're built for understanding each other's faces and feelings. There's also something to the incidental interactions and bonds that are formed during a process and which aren't scripted.

However, like with many things, technology can reduce the costs, frictions, and trade-offs involved in certain processes. Suppose you're running a process that covers a large distance and you don't have the funding to transport people to the same location for each meeting. In that case, it's possible to supplement some meetings and exercises with online sessions.

Online meetings can also be an effective way to squeeze out some extra hours or deliberation without asking participants to take a whole day out of their weekend. For example, a 2-hour midweek session after work hours could include additional speakers or small group discussions over a video conferencing tool like Zoom.

Some like to top and tail their online sessions with in-person sessions. This means that participants meet, form social bonds, and build their understanding of the process together before breaking to do learning sessions in online formats and before meeting again in person to do the difficult decision-making steps in person (often the more stressful moments of the process). Others prefer to do the learning and early generative work together and save the process context and social work for online formats, where they can be done quickly and during the week. There is no right or wrong way to divide the work—it'll depend on your cultural schedule and access to technology.

So far, we've only discussed how to effectively use video conferencing tools to move conversations online. But there are an increasing number of purpose-built tools for enabling online collaboration and specifically for citizens' assemblies. Basic tools like GroupMap, Figma, Miro, and Google Docs can help with online collaboration. Tools like Remesh and Polis are great for understanding where people agree and can be used for wider surveys and also in citizens' assemblies. Tools like YourPriorities, Colectiv can support agenda setting. Others, such as Talk to the

City, GoVocal, and PSi are useful for integrating the wider community. Conversation analysis tools like deliberAlde, Dembrane, Cortico and Jigsaw's Sensemaker can take transcripts from deliberations and quickly draw insights, key themes and support the deliberative process. Basic modelling and impact simulating tools such as Delib Simulator, Forio's Public Policy simulator, and tools like Beamm.Brussels can support making more informed recommendations. Not to mention improvements in translation, such as Google Meet's ability to do live English-to-Spanish translation.

Our advice? Start simple and build up slowly. Technology isn't an end in itself, but rather, it's a means to reducing the trade-offs between competing decisions. It enables you to do things that you otherwise wouldn't have been able to do.

Take Google Docs, for example. Typically, at the end of a citizens' assembly, you'll need to reconcile the drafting and editing that different small groups have been making to the recommendations that they're proposing. One way to do this is to keep track of paper copies of recommendations, write complete new ones when new edits are too numerous, and eventually, have someone



European Commission (2024) Lenka Thérová



CASE STUDY

SPAIN, CATALONIA

AN ASSEMBLY ON ADAPTING TO CLIMATE CHANGE WITH ENERGY AND FOOD SOLUTIONS

Overview: The first Catalan Citizens’ Assembly held at the regional level - representing a population of 8 million - was the Citizens’ Assembly for Climate of Catalonia, which convened six sessions between November 2023 and February 2024. These sessions took place in five different cities and included one online meeting.

The Assembly was organized by the Government of Catalonia, in response to demands from climate lobby group Extinction Rebellion. An Oversight Group composed of independent experts and representatives of civil society from both the environmental and citizen participation sectors, accompanied and supervised the project, from the initial planning and design phases of the Assembly through to its completion.

The Project: A total of 100 participants were selected using seven stratification criteria to ensure sociodemographic diversity. They were tasked with developing recommendations on two key political issues rather than the entire spectrum of climate policy. Those being: The deployment of renewable energies and the agri-food model.

In addition to receiving economic compensation for their participation, attendees were provided with transportation, accommodation, and catering services. Childcare and Catalan-Spanish simultaneous translation were also available. For online activities, individual training was offered, and physical facilities

were set up with on-site support for participants who preferred in-person guidance during virtual sessions.

During the recommendations phase, participants initially leaned towards less controversial topics, favouring consensus-based proposals and less impactful issues. In response, the project team and facilitators provided ongoing assessments of the recommendations, encouraging participants to engage with the more challenging, controversial, and high-impact dilemmas.

The Results: As a result, the final recommendations included evaluations of trade-offs and reflected the participants’ public judgement on each issue. The Assembly produced 48 recommendations, most of which have been accepted by the Catalan government, each accompanied by a formal explanation and defining specific political action. A follow-up system has been also established via the government’s citizen participation portal.

The experience highlighted the need for more feasible, sustainable deliberative projects and better institutional preparedness. For instance, a new law on citizen participation has been drafted to facilitate, among other things, the promotion of deliberative projects such as Citizens’ Assemblies and some of their critical components, including civic lotteries, the possibility of financially compensating citizens for their participation, but also strengthening impacts on policies and accountability.

Source: Government of Catalonia- Sub directorate of Citizen Participation; www.web.gencat.cat/ca/ciutadania/inici

type them up at a later date. There are a lot of inefficiencies here, and time is precious in deliberative processes.

Instead, if you have access to the relevant technology, the group writing exercises can take place in parallel on laptops with access to the same Google Document. This allows facilitators to prepopulate simple templates, keep track of task progress and quickly make drafting changes on the fly. The time savings here can be spent on more learning, more deliberating and drafting better recommendations.

SOME WORDS OF CAUTION

Think carefully about accessibility when it comes to using technology. Will everyone in the room be comfortable with it? How will you ensure that everyone can participate?

People tend to place too much trust in technology when it makes difficult tasks easier. What safeguards do you have in place to support the considered and critical use of technology? What is your plan for when participants rely too heavily on AI to do their work for them?

There are pros and cons to these scenarios, and you will need to balance them. If in doubt, err on the side of less technology until you’re confident in its integrity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It would be fair to say that the entire point of the process was to make good policy recommendations. But what makes for a “good” recommendation?

Some essential features to consider:

- The recommendations should be actionable (which includes how to pay for it).
- They should show reasoning and evidence
- They should reflect the final views of the assembly such that participants would publicly stand behind them.

You should already have done a lot of thinking about the type or shape of output you need. But if not, work backwards from what an ideal recommendation might look like and consider whether there are any requirements that, if they weren't met, would make recommendations more difficult to implement. What will need to be discussed? Is there anything that must be resolved?

If anything comes to mind, consider how the process could be adapted to ensure that the process for developing recommendations ensures that these formats or content are incorporated. This might inform the type of information you provide, the time you give the group and the need to schedule time for internal or external expert review (to test viability or develop more complex recommendations in response to a citizen brief).

The final recommendation report should be written entirely by the assembly members and unedited by anyone (this includes the facilitation team, the oversight team, or government staff). The unedited form of the report lends significant authenticity to the final document, which increases its popular legitimacy as a product of everyday people (compared to polished consultant documents, for example). It is okay if it is a bit rough- -this shows its authenticity.

There are many different ways in which this report can be completed. What is important is that participants are given the opportunity to start writing from a 'blank page.' We recommend a table with just three prompt words: **Recommendation, Reasoning, Evidence.** This is non-leading, and the freedom gives them assurance that they can say whatever they would like, contributing to their autonomy in the process.

When writing recommendations, a good framework to have in mind is that participants (topic depending) should aim to give recommendations on **what to do**, but **not how to do it** (*technically.*) The guiding principle here is **clarity of intent**. Rigid recommendations can become counterintuitive in flexible policy spaces, sometimes producing consequences that are incoherent with the original intention behind why a group made a specific recommendation.

This is not about avoiding specific outcomes ("highspeed rail by 2040" is fine), it's about avoiding overly narrow operational details that could unnecessarily tie the government's hands if conditions

change ("Build the high-speed rail link between City A and City B by 2040, allocating no more than 10% of the national transport budget to its construction and requiring the use of a certain tunnelling technology").

Good: Set the desired outcome clearly, with evidence, reasoning, and measurable criteria for success.

Avoid: Mandating a single lane to get there, when multiple viable routes could exist depending on evolving circumstances.

By allowing the commissioning authority the flexibility to use whatever tools they have to address a recommendation, the participants can focus on the desired future and key outcomes while ensuring this intent can be implemented in future, changing environments. For example:

Too constraining:

- "Build the high-speed rail link by 2040, allocating no more than 10% of the infrastructure budget by using a certain tunnelling technology."
- Risk: Commits to a single delivery model and fixed cost that may be suboptimal if resourcing or technology changes.

Better:

- "Build the high-speed rail link, and we can accept a 1% sales tax on homes to pay for it."
- Benefit: Clear on priorities and confronting the hard trade off of who bears the cost.

It is good practice to allow the commissioning authority to provide advice late in the process with regard to the feasibility and clarity of recommendations. There is little point in delivering recommendations that are out of scope or even out of jurisdiction, let alone unclear recommendations, or, as discussed above, overly constraining. This feedback is responding to the prompt: "If you received this recommendation today, how would you interpret it and what would you plan to do to action it?"



CASE STUDY

GERMANY

CASE STUDY: POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS ON
NUTRITION

Overview: In May 2023, the German Bundestag established its first citizens’ assembly on the topic ‘Nutrition in Transition’: Between a private matter and governmental responsibilities.

The Project: The 160 participants were randomly selected among all residents of Germany above the age of 16, taking into account a fair statistical representation of age, gender, geography, municipality size and educational background. A thematic criterion (dietary habits) was also included. In practice, there was no measurable self-selection bias with respect to this criterion, and it therefore did not influence the composition of the assembly.

The Citizens’ Assembly started its work in September 2023. Over the course of three weekends and six online meetings it discussed issues of food labelling, animal welfare, and affordability.

Participants were asked to rank the recommendations that had obtained a majority and thus identify their top nine priorities in the broad field of nutrition policy. The final recommendations were adopted during the last meeting in January 2024. The participants handed over their citizens’ report to the German Bundestag in February 2024.

The Council of Elders of the Bundestag set up a rapporteur’s group that prepared decisions on the framework of the Citizens’ Assembly and acted as an interlocutor between the Citizens’ Assembly and the parliamentary groups.

The Citizens’ Assembly was supported by a Scientific Advisory Board comprising experts from various scientific backgrounds. Its members were selected by the parliamentary groups but acted independently. The Scientific Advisory Board advised the administrative Citizens’ Assembly Project Team and the facilitators on the concept of the process and the selection of qualified researchers and practitioners providing information and expertise to the Citizens’ Assembly. Furthermore, its members provided feedback on a first draft of the recommendations.

The results: The report was discussed by the Bundestag during a plenary sitting in March 2024 and then referred to the Committee on Food and Agriculture as the lead committee. During the Committee phase, the Committees of the German Bundestag held six expert hearings and roundtables, hearing evidence from experts and stakeholders. In addition, two participants of the Citizens’ Assembly and two members of the Scientific Advisory Board were available for questions on the recommendations and the process leading to their adoption. At the end of the electoral term, the lead Committee drew up a report on its deliberations of the recommendations and the positions by political groups. In this report, the Committee Chairperson underlined that all recommendations were based on real-life experience and were suitable as a basis for further debate. He also recognized that the Citizens’ Assembly had succeeded in raising awareness for the topics of nutrition and agriculture among politicians and the larger public.

The Citizens’ Assembly has been evaluated by an independent evaluation team which published its first report on the quality and impartiality of the deliberative process in July 2024. A second report on the impact of the recommendations will follow.

Source: Bürgerräte Citizens’ Assemblies Project Team; www.bundestag.de

AUTHORITY AND RESPONSE
(FORMAL COMMITMENT)

Let’s skip to the end of the final day of the citizens’ assembly.

A small group of participants has just handed over the final recommendation report to the project’s commissioner. What happens next?

Your actions here will be shaped by the commitment outlined in the process design that you are drafting, and which will have been publicly stated by leaders and decision-makers. Ideally, they’ve made some clear commitment to act in some way to follow up on these recommendations and relay their level of support for following through with them.

YOU SHOULD CONSIDER

- Making the recommendation report public immediately.
- Deliver a response in person within 3-4 months.
- Publishing an accompanying response document that details an official position on each recommendation and closes the loop for participants.
- Regular updates on the implementation of recommendations.

You must continue to communicate the progress of each recommendation. At first, this might be a closing-the-loop meeting that might see you inviting participants back for an update 6 months later. You might then opt to maintain regular email contact with participants at key points of implementation. This approach is valuable because participants can continue to give insight into how recommendations could or should be implemented. It also continues to bring participants into the decision-making process, ensuring they remain advocates of the outputs.

In preparing for these steps, you should also be considering how these outputs will integrate with your existing decision-making systems to maximise their effectiveness. Planning for good recommendations now will help ensure that when they arrive, they can be implemented. What internal stakeholders need to be prepared? What resourcing needs to be allocated? How will you monitor implementation?



The Future Council U24, Switzerland (2024)
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Chapter 05

FOR PROJECT TEAMS: DELIVERY AND OPERATIONS

“IT’S A PRIDE. IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT BEING THAT WOMAN WHO CAME FROM THE QUILOMBO [BRAZILIAN HINTERLAND COMMUNITY FOUNDED BY PEOPLE OF AFRICAN ORIGIN], BUT ABOUT BEING THAT STRONG, COURAGEOUS WOMAN AND KNOWING THAT NOT EVERYONE HAS THE COURAGE TO LEAVE THEIR QUILOMBO AND SAY WHAT THEY WANT.”

REGINA LOEB, QUILOMBOLA LEADER FROM THE SÃO JUDAS TADEU COMMUNITY, WHO WORKED WITH ASSEMBLY ORGANISERS TO SUPPORT QUILOMBOLA PEOPLES’ INVOLVEMENT AT THE (RE)SURGENTES BUJARU ASSEMBLY, BRAZIL.

OPERATING YOUR PROJECT

The previous chapter helped you determine the key process design decisions. These are the things like your topic, your remit, who will be involved in your process, and the overall methods or formats you’re going to use. You now need to make key functional decisions to operate the project.

A process design is a bit like a recipe. The decisions in the previous chapter are like a list of ingredients that you’ll use, and the operational details in this chapter and the next are the instructions for their use.

We’ll cover the practical steps that you’ll take from beginning to end, from the idea for a citizens’ assembly through the conclusion, and hopefully, action on the recommendations.

SHORTER PROCESSES

For processes shy of the long-form assembly format, you’ll want to make sure you’re clear on what you are asking people to contribute, how the process works from a user design perspective, and about managing people’s expectations about their overall influence over the final decision.



Gipuzkoa Citizens Assembly participants presenting recommendations, Basque Country, Spain (2021)
—lone Ardaiz Osacar

Surveys and the broader community engagement processes that are chosen to complement any deliberative process should be asking questions that frame the contributions around values, priorities, and information (away from low-information solutions). Asking wish-list questions in surveys does not give you very useful information because respondents may avoid addressing trade-offs.

DECIDE ON FACILITATION AND THE VENUE

Citizens' assemblies ask participants to complete a complex task with a group of randomly selected people that they've never met before. This process requires some external support, to get a group of 30-40 people coherently working together and to structure the sessions and tasks so that the flow of information and the exercises that people complete lead to the final output.

A critical decision you'll need to make is:
Who will do the facilitation?

Traditionally, this role is kept at arm's length from the commissioning authority to maintain the independence of the process. It's also a specialised skill that is rarely found on hand in within governments. In more recurring or institutionalised settings, it makes sense for the administration to bring these skills in-house and take extra measures to guarantee independence.

If you're not familiar with facilitation or are not sure who to go to, reach out. There are deliberative practitioners all over the world eager to help and train people.

In most cases, you'll procure a facilitator by issuing a request for proposals in response to some project scoping. The process design decisions are a good starting point for this, but we advise against being too constraining. You risk accidentally locking the process into some design decisions that might be suboptimal. Try to stick to principles, outcomes, and examples.

INFORMATION

Information and judgment are required in equal parts to reach decisions, and while the judgment of everyday people has been shown to achieve very high levels of public trust, it is imperative that the method of provision of information does not erode that trust. This means that information you provide to participants cannot be a brochure of government successes, or even worse, marketing for a result.

Overall, the goal of the learning phase of a deliberative process is to provide assembly members with enough context to make informed recommendations. The challenges are that you only have so much time, people learn at different rates, and you need people to use this information, not just read it.

There are four key factors to providing information:

- Who decides what information is important
- What information is provided to people
- How it is provided to people
- When you provide it to people

What information do participants need to know to make informed recommendations?

There is no way to answer this question in an objective way. There will be a lot of uncontested essential information that people from opposing perspectives can agree is needed, but beyond this, we enter the contested information zone where many people in good faith can disagree over substance and importance.

How then, do we address this conundrum? There are two locations for resolving this issue: with participants and with stakeholders.

Primarily, a diversity of sources is key. A wide breadth of information increases the ability for participants to weigh different points of view and ensures that all the voices within a community or on a topic are being heard. This is critical because it complements the diversity of people in the selection process with a diversity of viewpoints in information sources.

Allowing citizens to control what information they do and do not receive is fundamental to building trust in any process. With

limited time, surveys or online discussions that ask people for questions and sources that they trust will be of higher value than making space for general and unsupported comments of opinion. Citizens should be given the power to choose those want to they hear. This addresses a mistrust of experts but also ensures they **do not feel led into a particular outcome** because of an impression that their information sources were restricted.

Participants should have access to three core pillars of information:

- Information provided by the government or convening public authority
- Information curated by stakeholders or active voices
- Information requested by citizens

This information must be both diverse and deep. It improves their questioning of sources and ultimately saves the group time otherwise spent asking questions that could have been clarified in the pre-reading. Diversity of sources and perspectives is also crucial for the process’s political credibility. Presenting all sides of the topic and openly sharing the problem alleviates any public perception of the selling of a result.

These core pillars of information are reflected in the following sources:

INFORMATION PROVIDED BY THE GOVERNMENT

A background information kit. Written in plain language, this should candidly describe the current situation, issues, and challenges, and the known options available for taking action. This should not be a brochure, but rather, it should err on the side of providing too much detail rather than too little.

The document aims to provide background information on the process and the decision to be made. You’re aiming to provide all the essential information for people to have a data baseline (quantitative), an understanding of the policy and practices today, previous approaches, and highlight threats and challenges. The more information in this document, the more participants will be able to rely on and reference it throughout the process. That will



Osnabrück University of Applied Sciences Prof. Dr. Melanie Speck, member of the Scientific Advisory Board during the German Bundestag Citizens’ Assembly on Nutrition in Transition. Germany (2023) © Deutscher Bundestag / Robert Boden / Mehr Demokratie

help us get ahead of information requests once the project is rolling.

The voice should be non-technical and the document should use plain language to openly share what is hardest about the decision. The process of distilling concepts into simple language can help make clear the key trade-offs and simplify the learning process for everyone. Make use of visuals and a mix of information formats to accommodate all learning styles.

Not all members will be well-versed in concepts related to the topic despite having nominated themselves to participate. You need to account for those who require the most catching up while providing opportunities for keen learners to dig deeper (i.e. references, links, and pointers for where to learn more).

Here is a sample table of contents split into two sections.

PROCESS MANUAL:

A brief introduction from the most senior decision-maker (Mayor, Minister, President), emphasising their commitment to the process and thanking the reader for participating. It is also a chance to foreground some dilemmas.

An introduction to the issue and the context for the process:

- Restating the remit with some short context on how it has come about. Outline the teams and roles, including your project team and the facilitation team
- List of negotiables and non-negotiables
- Explain why a deliberative process is being used to make a decision or influence a decision
- Explain what your organisation will do with the outputs (your commitment)
- Describe how to use this document (i.e. as a central resource to read beforehand and refer to throughout the process)

What is a citizens’ assembly:

- What it is
- How selection worked
- How the assembly will make decisions (usually Likert scale, 80% agreement)
- The wider engagement roadmap
- What the assembly can influence

Logistics:

- Meeting schedule, locations, travel advice
- Media and social media guidelines
- Filming and photography (if needed)

Outline the teams and roles, including your project team and the facilitation team

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Begin with basic information, including:

- Current legal and regulatory context for this process
- What the final decision is (not for the assembly but overall)
- What other things will be impacted by the decision
- What prevents you from just taking a decision now

Describe what is hardest about the remit. For example, you might share what is hardest about:

- Prioritising the functions and services to meet diverse community members needs
- Key trade-offs implicit in the decision

Include examples, where possible, to illustrate what is hard about the above.

Include prompt questions that ask people to think about the underlying trade-offs and relate them to their own experiences.

Share what is hardest, not just from your view, but also what you’ve heard from other perspectives

Also, share other ‘levers’ you could pull to help develop solutions (e.g., the financial, human, and other resources we all have at our disposal for problem-solving).

PROVIDE BACKGROUND ON:

- History of any key issues, key decisions, or within the organisation itself
- Where things currently stand in making the decision
- A breakdown of the community by demographics/key voices/stakeholders

Glossary of key terms

You'll see that this is going to be a big document. They're often 50-100 pages, sometimes even 200-page documents. It will require a lot of time and effort to get this right. But, when done well, organisations routinely report that this exercise has deep value beyond the assembly process itself—it deepens their own understanding of their organisation and the policy context.

You will need to decide who is responsible for producing the background information kit. Typically, this is done by either the commissioning authority or by an independent institution such as a university or a specific stakeholder reference group established to curate and develop information for the process. Each of these has pros and cons.

GOVERNMENT / CONVENING PUBLIC AUTHORITY

Pro: Clear statement of the commission authority's view and position on the current problem -allows a transparent 'sharing of the problem.'

Con: Is perceived as having a 'bias' because it is from the government. This means that people may be suspicious of information included or left out.

INDEPENDENT

Pro: Perceived as an independent source of information because it is not from the decision-maker. This means that participants might be more trusting of the information within.

Con: Perception of independence can lead some readers not to properly interrogate the information or seek a diversity of sources, often equating independence with a lack of bias. The information may miss critical context only located within the government.

**INFORMATION PROVIDED
BY STAKEHOLDERS**

Submissions from stakeholders will provide a complementary set of information to round out perspectives on the topic. Stakeholders are often invited to submit their perspectives on the different concerns through the convening of stakeholder information sessions and public submission processes.

You should help identify key industry and community stakeholders and seek their contribution in the room. Importantly, these stakeholders should represent many different perspectives on the topics. They're often invited to speak to the participants on the first day.

Stakeholders can provide information in many different formats:

- Written
- Record a video
- Invite to speak
- Contribute to a list of other potential sources

**INFORMATION REQUESTED
BY CITIZENS**

Central to the open, non-leading nature of what these processes focus on is to simply ask participants, *"What do you need to know and who do you trust to inform you?"* This question should be posed to participants as part of their deliberations, and after their first two weeks of discussion, they might also be tasked with a refined version of the question: *"What more do you need to know to make an informed decision?"*

This question enables participants to identify information gaps present in what they have read or heard from and choose who they trust as a source of that information. Remember, not all information requires an in-person speaker. A useful criterion is that often quantitative information can be answered specifically and in writing, while qualitative responses are better given in person and explored through questioning (though this is not a hard and fast rule).



CASE STUDY

AUSTRALIA, MELBOURNE

ELECTRICITY NETWORK LOOKS TO TURN PASSIVE CUSTOMERS INTO ACTIVE CO-CREATORS OF POLICY

Overview: In 2023-24, Jemena Electricity Network undertook a bold and innovative engagement program in Melbourne, Australia, redefining how utility companies involve customers in shaping their business plans. At the heart of this process was a customer-driven People’s Panel that included 45 randomly selected individuals from diverse backgrounds, who assembled for five Saturdays over six months to deliberate on Jemena’s electricity distribution pricing and energy transition strategy for 2026-31.

The Project: The participants were faced with the complex question: “How should Jemena prepare for a sustainable energy future while meeting customer and community needs today?” To tackle the question, the program prioritised inclusive, informed, and collaborative decision-making. Consequently, six Customer Voice Groups were created to reflect diverse lived experiences,—including First Nations people, people with disabilities, multicultural communities, and youth, while additional business forums gathered insights from small and medium enterprises. This wasn’t token engagement. Collectively, the group engaged in 1,780 hours of combined learning, dialogue, and deliberation. Past participants were involved in co-designing the process, ensuring lived experience shaped both structure and content.

Engagement streams were interwoven: Voice Group insights shaped the People’s Panel discussions; Panel members observed Voice Group sessions; and industry experts joined to provide technical guidance. Every session dedicated 25% of its time to structured learning using videos, plain-language materials, and direct dialogue with Jemena staff.

The Results: The outcomes were tangible. The People’s Panel delivered 16 recommendations, many of which were adopted in Jemena’s draft plan. The recommendations ranged from tiered supply charges and a new “solar soak” tariff, to investment in education and innovation. Jemena publicly committed to implementing the recommendations “to the maximum extent possible.”

The People’s Panel process, designed and facilitated by MosaicLab, included pre-and post-engagement surveys to measure satisfaction, trust, and participant experience. This deep, inclusive engagement transformed participants from passive customers into active co-creators of policy. Jemena’s approach set a new benchmark for community engagement in the energy sector, proving that when given the tools and trust, customers can help design a smarter, fairer, and more sustainable energy future.

“It seemed in the beginning a daunting process, but it’s actually really amazing to see the diversity of ideas that came out, and also where there were so many ideas that were very similar, there seems to be a number of themes which are quite centralized, which is interesting because we’re such a diverse group of people.” – Jemena People’s Panel member.

Source: MosaicLab; mosaiclab.com.au

CONDUCTING A CIVIC LOTTERY

You should now have a clear idea of who will be selected to be in the room for your citizens’ assembly. It’s time to figure out how you’ll go about finding them, convincing them to take part, and then ultimately choosing the final assembly members, also known as conducting a civic lottery.

THIS SECTION WILL HAVE FOUR SUBSECTIONS:

01

Preparation

Logistical and design steps that you’ll need to complete before you can successfully recruit people.

02

Reaching participants

The process of finding and contacting potential participants.

03

Recruiting participants

The process of convincing potential participants to be part of the process, including things like the content of invitations, reimbursements, and FAQs.

04

Selecting participants

The process of drawing the lottery.

These are sequential steps that you’ll need to follow to eventually land on a list of assembly members.

A note on gender representation: In some cultural contexts, you may need to navigate social structures that would typically see a man represent the household in public decisions. People who have delivered projects where this occurs manage this by explaining why they are choosing a woman and not a man for this project, and that if they do not get a balance, then it will not work at all. This combination of a clear explanation can help you achieve a diverse group.

01 PREPARATION

We covered some of the preparation steps in the previous chapter (determining stratification variables, eligibility, and boundaries), but there are more steps to consider before you can move on to determining how you’ll contact potential participants.

As part of any recruitment process, you’ll need to have some principled way in which you’ll invite people to participate. Depending on which method you choose, you’ll need to consider how you’ll access the relevant data, infrastructure, and systems that you need. You should expect institutional bottlenecks and start this planning process early. For example, many jurisdictions find it difficult to gain access to citizen data that can help improve the accuracy and efficacy of recruitment methods. There are often processes that administrators need to go through to justify access, and these can take weeks or even months. Many a process has been delayed when hit with this reality.

DETERMINING YOUR QUOTAS

From the previous chapter, you should now have the eligibility rules for membership of the assembly and the boundaries or catchment areas for the community in question, and finally, a list of the stratification quotas you’ll use when selecting participants.

Technically, setting the quotas can be complex. The default approach is to take the percentages that you’ve drawn from your demographic data and represent those in the assembly as closely as possible. Doing this strictly can introduce some complications. First, it can create situations where some potential participants are much more likely to be selected than others (sometimes almost a certainty) and second, this certainty can create opportunities for manipulation.

FIGURE 5.01

CATEGORY	PERCENTAGE	TARGET	ACCEPTABLE RANGE
Age: 18-24	10%	4	3-5
Age: 25-34	15%	6	5-7
Age: 35-44	15%	6	5-7
Age: 45-54	20%	8	7-9
Age: 55-64	15%	6	5-7
Age: 64-74	15%	6	5-7
Age: 75+	10%	4	3-5
Gender: Man	50%	20	18-21
Gender: Woman	50%	20	18-21
Gender: Other	?	0	0-1
Location: North	60%	24	22-26
Location: South	20%	8	7-9
Location: East	20%	8	7-9
Education: None	20%	8	7-9
Education: High School	40%	16	15-17
Education: University	40%	16	15-17

The best way to address these risks is to have a high-quality RSVP pool (people who have said yes to your invitations). This means having plenty of people for all different combinations of people in your different categories. For example, a pool of 500 people is not good if you only have two people under 25. A recommended number of people is 3x quota, and an ideal number is 10x.

If you don't have a good RSVP pool and you're unable to improve it, one way to address this is to introduce some flexibility and have acceptable ranges for your quotas.

The quotas should look something like Figure 5.0.1 for a 40-person assembly. You can see that there are ranges that cover the statistical point, allowing some movement. In the case of the 'Gender: Other' quota, we don't have data for that category point, but we know that there is a small percentage of the population that may need to be represented. An estimate here allows the tool to provide a spot without guarantees, helping to minimise manipulation. You will make decisions on this point and others based on what is appropriate and relevant in your context.

How should you deal with people who drop out of the process once it has started? If you aim to end with 40 and not just start with 40, the best approach is to anticipate this beforehand and select additional participants from demographics more likely to drop out. So, a rough guide is to increase the number of participants by 10% and allocate those spots to demographics that are harder to reach.

02 REACHING PARTICIPANTS

The first step in the civic lottery process is making contact with potential assembly members. You will need to develop a plan for reaching them and inviting them to participate.

Who you want in the room will shape how you invite them. It is essential to reach all needed groups, not only those who would normally participate in community engagement processes. Reaching a representative sample of the population will require an approach that reaches as many different people as possible. Since there are many ways of reaching people, you'll need to estimate which approach will work best for your context.

If we work backwards from the 40 people that you'll end with, you'll need roughly 120-400 people in your RSVP pool (depending on how diverse your pool is), which means you can estimate the number of invitations you'll need with a rough response rate. The ideal database is a list of residents from which you'll be able to directly invite. Not many communities have, or have easy access to, these lists. The next best thing is to gain access to a large list of addresses to which you can send invitations. The difference here is that you're not directly inviting individuals but sending an invitation to a household.

There might be a few different ways of gaining access to such a database. Most postal companies have a deliverable address file or database that you may be able to purchase.. Other government agencies might manage a similar database that you can use.

Once you have an address list, you'll need to determine which addresses to invite. If you're sending physical mail invitations, this is best done randomly. For example, in some locations, the best practice approach is what is often called 2-stage random selection, where mail invitations are sent to a randomly selected list of addresses, from which recipients will either accept or reject their invites and another final random draw is done. If, however, you're doorknocking, you can't just randomly draw addresses from the list because it may end up being very inefficient and therefore very expensive (time and money). You'll need to develop a system for which streets and homes to knock at that can be defended as reasonably fair. You might randomly choose clusters of streets or neighbourhoods (depending on their size) and then knock on every third door. Even better, pick house numbers - you must avoid perceptions of bias.

What happens if you can't get access to a database, or there isn't the right infrastructure in your community to support a more digital approach? You take the principles of the above approaches and apply them to your context.

For example, in the project/case-study in Malawi, practitioners did not have access to data or address lists; instead, they went to local markets and handed out coloured pieces of paper to random people. A child then drew one of the colours from a hat. Those with that colour were in the RSVP pool from which a second stratified draw was made. This passed the test of the selection process being transparently fair and diverse.

What about combining methods? Different strategies will reach different kinds of people. There are many factors that will make

people respond differently to different approaches. You might opt for mixing your recruitment to account for these differences. Complementing mailed invitations with door-knocking, when targeted to the right demographics, has the potential to boost your overall response rates. What will work for you is something that you'll only be able to learn through testing and learning.

What if you don't reach enough people? A nightmarish scenario unfolds when there are hard deadlines for the start of the assembly, and not enough RSVPs have been received. You should be thinking about this well ahead of time.

It's usually easy to predict which demographics will respond at lower rates. They tend to be in groups that are harder to reach for various reasons, such as minorities or people that are not typically sought out in normal engagement processes (and therefore are less likely to accept a cold invitation). You should plan strategies for reaching these people so that when you check the early response rates against your category quotas, you can deploy a backup plan. One such backup plan is to utilise established community groups and communication channels to raise awareness of the invitations and the process. Another is to send additional invitations to locations where you know there is a higher concentration of people you need responses from. A further strategy is to proactively partner with community leaders to build trust and awareness in the community ahead of time. A common underrepresented demographic is young people. You might seek out schools, universities, sports clubs, and trade schools to raise awareness and send additional invitations.



A group photo of the Citizens' Assembly on Nutrition, Germany. © Deutscher Bundestag / Robert Boden / Mehr Demokratie

03 RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

Before you can start the process of inviting people, you need to think carefully about the substance of inviting people. In other words, how will you convince people to accept your invitation?

There are three key avenues:

1. The opportunity itself
2. The attractiveness of the offer
3. The quality of the invitation

If your invitation can convey that the process will provide a meaningful opportunity to influence a public decision, then people will sit up and consider this offer differently when compared to traditional community engagement. The opportunity to make a difference and to serve the community appeals to people. It's just that people don't often feel like their input will be listened to or that they have something useful to contribute. This can be conveyed with a personal invitation from the Minister, Mayor, or visible government representative, emphasising the remit and their commitment to the process and the follow-through.

One useful technique is to place an emphasis on the element of doing democracy better. While this will resonate differently depending on your local context, this link to democratic reform and participant autonomy can be useful for capturing people's interest as it builds upon underlying dissatisfaction or distrust with public decision-making by reinforcing the uniqueness of this opportunity. **Emphasis should also be made to note the independence of the selection process as outside the control of the commissioning authority.**

People also value their time. You must decide whether you will reimburse people for their participation in your processes. Depending on the time commitment, payment will generally encourage more people to participate. This changes the type of people who register, from those with the time and financial stability to a broader group of people, especially younger people, and those with lower incomes. Some people may hold concerns that people will attend primarily for the reimbursement, but the reimbursements are not traditionally enough money to make this a particularly appealing incentive, and we find that even if this does draw attention, the process is compelling enough that these people still contribute meaningfully. Remember, we want a wide range of participants, not those who are attending only because

they're interested in the issue. We strongly recommend compensating participants and making this clear on the invitations.

Reimbursement for participants can take different forms. You might want to think about the structural support systems you can make available to participants to help them attend. This might include an option for child-care, a cash reimbursement for costs incurred attending, or, in some cases, it might be a basic needs provision.

The look and feel of your invitations matter. People receive enough junk mail or mail that they mentally catalogue as sales material from their governments. You need to rise above this and convey that this opportunity is different. It's time to pull out all of the behavioural science insights and do your best to help the invitation survive the trip from the mailbox to the recycling bin. You might lean into the rare opportunity to contribute: "You're one of only 5,000 households to receive this invitation."

A physical invitation has several benefits here:

- Hard-copy invitations have a longer life.
- They look more formal and important (people feel valued and that they're needed).
- They're easier to accurately distribute to homes.

There are some basic features of an invitation:

- The commissioning authority and its logo
- The remit and a brief explanation of the problem
- A brief explanation of the process
- Key logistics like dates and venue location
- A QR code and link for registering
- A phone number for additional questions

The easiest method for registering is with an online form. This should have a simple URL and let people complete the relevant demographic information, as well as their name, address, and contact details. You should also provide the option of people calling or SMSing in (if they do not have internet). Another option is to include a mail-in form with the invite, which allows people to post back their registration.



CASE STUDY

**REPUBLIC OF IRAQ
BASRA, MISSAN
AND THI-QAR**

**CASE STUDY: YOUTH
ENGAGEMENT IN RECOVERY
EFFORTS**

Overview: From 2019 to March 2023, the Local Area Development Programme Phase III (LADP III), implemented by UNDP and UN-Habitat with funding from the European Union, aimed to support Iraq's recovery and stability by strengthening local governance and encouraging inclusive planning. A key feature of the project was its focus on youth engagement, especially in regions where frustration and unrest among young people had been particularly intense.

The Project: Iraq's southern governorates of Basra, Missan, and Thi-Qar piloted citizens' assemblies specifically, youth civic councils designed to empower young Iraqis to actively shape policies and engage directly with local authorities. Through a series of workshops, open forums, and collaborative sessions, 65 young participants co-developed models for youth councils tailored to the specific needs of their communities. The opportunity to participate in the assembly was publicly announced, and young people applied to be involved. The final participants were selected based on key criteria.

Each council took on a local challenge: in Basra, the focus was on raising awareness about decentralisation; in Missan, it was addressing the growing issue of illegal drug use; and in Thi-Qar, the youth tackled climate change and drought awareness. With support from UNDP, the participants gained hands-on experience in deliberative democracy, building both their confidence and practical skills.

The Results: The youth councils have since evolved into dynamic platforms for volunteerism, advocacy, and local problem-solving-proving that show, when young people are given the tools and the voice, they can be powerful agents of change in building more inclusive and sustainable governance structures in Iraq.

Source: UNDP Baghdad -Iraq; www.undp.org

In terms of doorknocking, best practice involves leaving behind a physical invitation and delivering the key messages before answering any follow-up questions. The content will be similar, but you'll have the advantage of being able to anticipate some of the immediate questions (often including: "Is this fake?")

Recruiting participants doesn't stop with invitation delivery. People will have questions that you'll want to answer with an FAQ on a website and over the phone.

Some common questions include:

- Is the process genuine? (people don't expect this kind of offer)
- Do people have to attend all the sessions? (they do)
- Can I give this invitation to someone else? (they cannot)
- Can you help them complete the form because they're not tech savvy (you should)

This concierge-like service will continue once you've selected the final panel. You'll be required to guide people through the process and meet their needs to ensure that they can both contribute fully and until the end.

04 SELECTING PARTICIPANTS

Once your registration period has closed, it is time to do the final random draw. There are a number of different ways to do this. The best is to use an online tool which takes your categories and quotas table, your registrations list, your desired number of participants, and draws an assembly. You can seek advice from another practitioner for the range of digital tools available.

Those who are selected should then be contacted, seeking a confirmation in writing from the participant. This is usually done by email and should match the authority of the invitation and be clear about why this is a good use of their time. People might still drop out at this point, so it is often useful to emphasise any reimbursement or meals that will be made available, and address any accessibility concerns they may have.

You should also contact each participant by phone before the first meeting to build a strong personal commitment to participating, noting that once underway, we cannot backfill for non-attendees.

People are much more likely to attend when they've spoken to you on the phone compared to only having answered an email.

Remember any exclusions you are considering for your project. People who are in political employment or have any form of involvement in the issue should opt out of the selection. Outside of this criterion, it can be hard to draw a firm line for who is or is not eligible for selection. One nuanced way of determining eligibility is to ask a potential participant to consider: if it were public knowledge that they were involved as a participant, would people think that it was fair or not?

THE MEDIA

The media is an element that you will likely not have much control over. You should be as welcoming as possible to any media outlets that can attend and cover the process. This is in keeping with the fundamental transparency of each process and crucial to the public-facing impact of the process beyond its conclusion.

A useful approach might be to have journalists interview some participants throughout the process, checking in with the same participants to see their views change and to tell a bit of their personal story. This helps convey the sense that there are 'people like me' in the room making decisions. Participants do need to be instructed not to pre-judge any recommendations. This is because not all decisions are final until they are decided on by the entire group and included in the final report.

The wider public must have an opportunity to 'meet' the participants. This should occur before a decision is made. This allows the wider community to relate to the participants and the process without relating it to any particular result or decision. This helps scale the impact of the process as the message is spread throughout the community that people like them are involved in making a significant decision for their community. Your communications plan should be proactive here and do most of the work. If the media sees value in contributing, then that is welcome.

Of course, the choice to participate in media is optional. Where cameras are in the room for livestreaming purposes, for example, a simple practice is to use different coloured name tags to make it clear to camera operators those that do not wish to be publicly identified.



CASE STUDY

REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES

PROMOTING PEACE AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AFTER COVID

Overview: In 2019, the Bangsamoro region in the southern Philippines achieved a degree of autonomy. Self-rule was the result of a 2014 peace treaty, which voters endorsed via plebiscite five years later. The creation of the new autonomous region helped bring a peaceful resolution to decades of armed conflict between the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and the Philippine government.

Nevertheless, the Bangsamoro peace process faced the COVID-19 pandemic at a critical moment of governance scaffolding. Bangsamoro was experiencing many challenges, including strain on systems, humanitarian challenges, and increased displacement. In specific areas, conflict and displacement led to the declaration of a “state of calamity.”

The Project: To strengthen peace in the region, the NGO and peacekeeping organisation Humanitarian Dialogue ran four in-person citizens assemblies in Bangsamoro communities (each one-and-a-half days long and attended by 25-30 people) to help chart the course for post-COVID economic recovery.

The facilitation design process for the ‘Boost Bangsamoro’ project was unique. It brought together deliberative engagement design experts from Australia (DemocracyCo) together with local facilitators, who understood the local and cultural contexts, to design a facilitation approach that was

deliberative and met local cultural and societal needs and norms.

DemocracyCo trained local facilitators in deliberative processes and deliberative facilitation techniques. Then DemocracyCo worked with local facilitators to co-design the Assembly facilitation approach and running sheets through a design clinic. Local facilitators ran the first Assembly before reconvening with DemocracyCo to review what worked and didn’t work. This enabled them to adjust the facilitation approach and running sheets to address the issues. This approach ensured that the process drew on the best knowledge to make a deliberative process successful, while responding to local cultural and societal needs and contexts. It also helped to build the skills of facilitators in deliberative methods in the Philippines.

The results: The process demonstrated how deliberation can help raise the voices of citizens and have an impact even within the context of a heavily conflicted political environment.

“The result of this will be a basis so we can write laws to improve our service for our constituents, especially the grassroots.” –Moharrim Mohammad, Consultant, Ministry of Labor and Employment, Philippines

“It’s here we learned, in this seminar how the process works, in how to help the people in our area.” –Al-Romy Aminullah, Boost Bangsamoro participant, Maguindanao, Philippines

“I’m excited because I like attending seminars because I don’t really learn so much at school. Instead, I learn much more from outside.”–Sherhana Mendoro, Boost Bangsamoro participant, Tawi Tawi, Philippines.

Source: Democracyco; democracyco.com.au

YOUR ROLE WHEN THINGS ARE UNDERWAY

In the room, government staff, and anyone not a part of the facilitation or oversight teams, are in the room as observers. As observers, they demonstrate a commitment to the process while maintaining an observational role not an active role.

There are situations where government staff are well suited to answer off-the-cuff questions arising from participants. Typically, they are either too eager or very hesitant to play this role. Often, they are concerned about providing their perspectives on a problem because of the way it can be construed as the “government” position.

With an independent facilitator in the room, an environment can be created that enables government staff to provide real-time fact checks or grounding statements that help the participants find their way to their own decisions. The simple rule is that the **participants decide when they want to hear from staff and that staff only act on directions from the facilitator.**

There are two other key contributions. First, **you’ll be responsible for responding to information requests throughout the process.** Participants will accumulate questions and citations that will need responses. Where these are requests for government information, they will be your responsibility. Second, between the penultimate and final meeting, **draft recommendations are sometimes made available to the commissioning authority for feedback.**

YOUR ROLE WHEN THINGS ARE OVER

Closing the loop is an important part of all processes. You now have an informed group of people who are valuable resources in sharing decisions with the community and raising awareness of what exactly the government does. This means you should regularly check in with them on the implementation of their recommendations and get their feedback on your progress. You may even want to establish an ‘alumni’ group that allows participants of the different deliberations you operate to stay in touch.

In addition to closing the loop, you are also responsible for disseminating and scaling the decision. This means raising public awareness of both the decision and the role of everyday people in making the decision. The previously mentioned role of the media is useful here. You might also seek to include a communications or publicity aspect to the process from the beginning. **An effective form of this is recording video interviews with participants that capture their ‘journey’ throughout the deliberation.** There are two important narratives to explain here: first, that the people in the room are everyday people; second, that they spent time learning and talking with one another before arriving at a common ground decision independent from government influence.

You should encourage participants to talk about their experience at their school, sports club, workplace, or on social media. This helps the experience of 40 informed citizens spread to a wider, and diverse mix of several thousand people. People often place more trust in familiar faces than in the news. Clearly communicating the independence of the process and who made the decision are the major factors in increasing public trust in a decision. Facilitating public deliberations is an honour, an adventure, and the most humbling of experiences.

Right: Members of the Children and Young People’s Assembly on Biodiversity Loss exploring Knocksink Wood, Co.Wicklow, Ireland (2022)





Rivne Citizens' Assembly, Ukraine (2026):
Daryna Sokolova, Council of Europe,
oversees 45 randomly selected residents
who were tasked with developing concrete
recommendations for local authorities on
how to make Rivne a place where people
want to stay and build their lives. Image:
Council of Europe

Chapter 06

FACILITATION

"WHEN THE AIR-RAID ALERTS SOUNDED, PARTICIPANTS SIMPLY MOVED THEIR CHAIRS TO THE SHELTER AND CONTINUED DELIBERATING. IT IS A POWERFUL TESTAMENT TO THE FACT THAT LOCAL DEMOCRACY IS NOT JUST A PROCESS; IT IS A PILLAR OF NATIONAL RESILIENCE."

DARYNA SOKOLOVA, SENIOR PROJECT OFFICER,
COUNCIL OF EUROPE, UKRAINE

THE FUNDAMENTALS OF FACILITATION

This chapter provides a checklist for first-time Citizens' Assembly facilitators to ensure they cover the basics. It's a list of what needs to be covered. Some content will be repeated from previous chapters to help make this a one-stop, comprehensive overview.

This is, however, not a list of *how to do it*. There are many ways to facilitate small groups to complete tasks and work cohesively. There's a lot of local cultural context in how this is done. And honestly, there are excellent, comprehensive guides out there that we couldn't improve on.

One publication we would strongly recommend is 'Facilitating Deliberation: A Practical Guide' by MosaicLab, which has been made freely available through a Creative Commons license courtesy of the AI & Democracy Foundation.

THE ROLE OF THE FACILITATOR

Facilitation is one of the single most important aspects of any deliberative process. It involves the management of everything that happens "inside the room." The facilitation team is responsible for taking a selection of everyday people along the entire deliberative journey. It is a journey that starts from scratch, from knowing nothing about a topic, through a shared learning experience, to making decisions together that will shape the future of their community, in a neutral, non-leading way. It's as hard as it sounds.

The facilitator's role begins with contributing to the design of the process. They should be an advisor on all the key design decisions, including the number of days, the number of participants, and even the remit. This is because they will be directly involved with fulfilling each aspect of the process and because they have unique insight into the feasibility of each design decision. A bad outcome occurs when design decisions are made without facilitator involvement and they end up impractical, dysfunctional, or at worst, impossible to fulfil.

The facilitator's role is to come up with a process that flows step by step, with a set of activities that move people through the stages of **getting information, understanding information, coming up with ideas, reviewing, prioritising and refining.**



An Assembly of the Permanent Citizens'
Dialogue in Ostbelgien, Belgium (2019)

All of this is done with an eye on how data is managed, including both the inputs to the process and the outputs from each step. This role requires an overall facilitation plan and detailed run sheets for each session or meeting.

PRINCIPLES OF FACILITATION

These facilitation principles relate directly to the facilitator's responsibilities and are broadly applicable to the facilitation of most workshop situations. We focus on describing how these principles relate specifically to the facilitation of a public deliberation, with guidance on how they can be upheld in practice.

COMPREHENSIVE PLANNING

Comprehensive planning is necessary for a successful deliberation that responds to the remit and adheres to the principles of deliberation and facilitation. It also ensures that all key players understand and can deliver on their roles. A focus on how small groups can complete a series of tasks with sufficient depth and time to feel ownership is a key skill.

INDEPENDENCE

Facilitators must remain independent and neutral and never express a view on the issue being discussed. The participants should feel the facilitator is there to assist them, not the commissioning authority.

CLEAR PURPOSE

Deliberating group members must have a clear understanding of the purpose and scope of their participation. There should be a strong focus on the task (meeting the remit) and the series of steps that will enable the group to achieve that task.

RESPECT FOR PARTICIPANTS

Facilitators should cultivate an atmosphere of mutual respect with participants and trust that they will be capable of doing the work of deliberation.

RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS

Respectful relationships should be developed among deliberating group members.

PARTICIPATION

Each group member should be encouraged to actively participate in the deliberation.

GROUP RESPONSIBILITY

Group members should be supported to take as much responsibility as possible for doing the work of deliberation and achieving a decisive outcome.



CASE STUDY

LATIN AMERICA: COLOMBIA, BRAZIL, ARGENTINA, AND MEXICO

ADAPTING TO GLOBAL CLIMATE CHANGE AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Overview: Citizens' Assemblies are increasingly being used as a tool to engage the public in climate related decision-making. An innovative project on this theme has been the 2024 (Re)surgentes initiative which brought together four citizens' assemblies in different cities across Colombia, Brazil, Argentina, and Mexico, all connected through a shared methodological framework and a unified thematic focus: How can Latin America mitigate the climate crisis?

The Project: Each citizens' assembly partnered with a local authority and followed the same structured approach of including about 50 participants in each location, while addressing a specific local issue. In Argentina, the Mar del Plata assembly members identified local challenges and proposed potential solutions aligned with the three pillars of the city's Climate Action Plan. In Brazil, recommendations were put forward on the theme of a Sustainable Bioeconomy: Pathways and Options to Generate Jobs, Income and Quality of Life in Bujaru. At the Buenaventura Assembly in Colombia, solid waste management was in focus, and in Mexico, the assembly deliberated on 16 lines of action related to climate adaptation policies in the Nuevo León State Climate Change Plan.

As a complement to the assemblies, the (Re)surgentes project organisers also included a final stage of regional dialogue that was open to the general public, called the Intercity Pact. This stage sought to discuss the principles developed by each assembly with a broader audience. To facilitate participation, a digital platform was created to provide interested citizens with the support to comment on or contribute to each specific recommendation outlined by the assemblies.

The results: By fostering deep connections between citizens' assemblies and leveraging technology to generate meaningful and impactful outcomes, (Re)surgentes stands as a landmark in participatory climate action across Latin America.

Contacts:

Argentina: Democracia en Red; democracyos.io

Brazil: Delibera Brasil; ; deliberabrasil.org

Colombia: Exituto de Política Abierta; exituto.org

Mexico: Instituto Del Sur Urbano; sur.institute/instituto/ and

[Fundacion Ideemos](https://fundacionideemos.org); ideemos.org

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

The information made available to workshop participants and the information produced by the group should be managed carefully.

ADAPTIVE FACILITATION

Facilitators should plan for the different needs of group members and be able to adapt in the moment.

TRANSPARENCY

The facilitation of a public deliberation should be highly transparent, both for the deliberating group and for the wider community.

STEPS OF FACILITATION

Here is an overview of the steps that are taken in a citizens' assembly-style deliberation. The steps include getting started, bringing in information, generating ideas, writing and review, testing draft recommendations, final review and rewrite, final agreement, presentation and closing, and post-event.

➔ STEP 1: GETTING STARTED

PRE-DELIBERATION SURVEY

A pre-deliberation survey is a useful tool to gather the thoughts of your participants before they enter into 'the room' (not to be confused with a Deliberative Poll).

You should ask questions around values and principles, *and not for their answer to the remit*. This might include questions around their trust in government, previous involvement in community engagement, and their likelihood of future involvement.

Asking for answers when they have not heard information or deliberated can to encourage them to form views that they may find hard to shift from (this makes your task even harder). For example, if in your pre-deliberation survey you ask participants if

they think you should have a new airport, you may end up placing your participants into “for” or “against” groups that will now focus the conversation on who does or does not want an airport. Most people are not sure how they feel about any given policy problem because they have not seen a diversity of information or spent much time thinking about the problem. If you ask them for views on solutions at the outset, you risk nudging them toward premature conclusions.

HOST WELCOME, OVERVIEW AND AUTHORITY

The source of the processes’ authority (e.g. Mayor, the Minister) should welcome the participants. This is an easy way of ensuring the importance of the process is communicated to those giving up their time to be a part of a public decision.

FACILITATOR INTRODUCTION—REMIT, PROCESS, PATH TO OUTPUT

From the outset, the facilitator should be clear about what the problem the group is solving and what process they will be using to get there. This can take the form of a quick run through the dates (what will happen at each meeting) and an overview of what will be accomplished by the end. It is always have the remit visible in the room as an easy reminder (up on the wall or on a projector screen).

DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

At the outset, the facilitator should also be very clear about the process for coming to a decision. Deliberative processes can vary in the threshold they use for a recommendation being “agreed” >80% agreement in the room is a common threshold. It captures wide support while allowing for some disagreement, noting that the group needs to strike a balance between making recommendations that everyone can agree to and finding compromise where they can.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING & GROUP WORK—INTRODUCTIONS, SOCIAL STYLES, BIAS AND CRITICAL THINKING

Once you’ve done the explaining of how the project will unfold, it is time to begin the introduction exercises that introduce the participants to one another. These are activities designed to introduce people to meet one another, but also to give them a sense of who from their community is in the room. There are a few key activities here.

The first is to ask everyone to stand and break into their different demographics. You might first ask them to split by their age groups, then come back together and split by where they live. The visual nature of having them stand and form their groups means people can clearly see that there is a mix of everyday people in the room. They can be told that this is the case but seeing the diversity and how people mix between groups tells a clear story.

The second is to introduce the idea that different people behave differently in social situations. There are many different ‘social styles’ exercises that can fulfil this function so you should choose your favourite (and one that works for your cultural background).

A simple one is to have everyone choose whether they tend to ‘ask’ or tend to ‘tell,’ and whether they are task-oriented or people-oriented. It may be important to stress that this is just an exercise, and people shouldn’t worry too much about where it places them, but the purpose is to make it clear that different people have different social styles. You can refer to this exercise throughout the facilitation to ensure that small groups have a mix of social styles.

Social styles inform a person’s communication style and preferences in terms of the type of information they want, the form of the information, and the way they communicate.

By understanding a person’s dominant style, you can tailor the way in which you communicate to improve their understanding of a project and to improve your connection.

The third exercise is walking through critical thinking and biases. newDemocracy has produced two videos that are available online (Critical Thinking, Unconscious Biases). These clips walk through the concept of critical thinking and biases, and some ways of

thinking that will be helpful for participants when it comes to interrogating information.

Critical thinking is about training participants to examine the information they receive through six different aspects:

- **Clarity**
Is a piece of information clear and specific?
- **Accuracy**
Is a statement actually true or supported by data?
- **Relevance**
Is the point relevant to the question?
- **Depth**
Does the information address the complexity of the topic? Is it detailed enough?
- **Breadth**
What other points of view might be missing?
- **Logic**
Does the information make sense? Is it logically consistent?

Unconscious biases cover six common types of biases that can shape how people think about information or a question. This exercise explains them and how to limit their impacts:

- **Anchoring bias**
- **Groupthink**
- **Blind spots**
- **Confirmation bias**
- **Information bias**
- **Authority bias**

WORKING AGREEMENTS

Participants need to agree on how they will work together as a group. This means considering how they should work together and what key agreements they will refer back to later in the process. Some examples for when participants feel stuck on this point: share of voice (hearing from everyone and not just those who like talking), respecting differences of view and encouraging everyone to be inquisitive. This is also useful as a first exercise in agreeing on something as a group (let them know they did this).



CASE STUDY

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, COLORADO

MONTROSE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY ON CHILDCARE

Overview: In Montrose, Colorado, a town of approximately 20,000 residents, limited access to affordable and reliable childcare had become a growing community concern. In 2023, Unify America partnered with local Montrose leaders to convene a randomly selected panel of 46 residents representing a cross-section of the community.

Over 12 weeks, citizens met (primarily online) to explore the childcare challenge in depth. They were provided with fact-based briefings and heard from various experts and stakeholders in the form of written and video materials. Facilitators led small-group discussions that created space for participants to listen, share experiences, and build relationships across differences. Through this structured deliberation process, delegates developed, debated, and refined solutions before voting on five recommendations that each achieved more than 70% support, including a centralized coordination network of childcare providers and expanded use of school facilities for childcare services.

Outcome: The Assembly concluded with a public celebration in February 2024, where local officials, including the Mayor and County Commissioners, publicly committed to engaging with the recommendations.

Beyond the proposals themselves, the process worked to build trust and demonstrated the value of collaborative problem-solving. Inspired by the experience, participants and other residents sought to ensure that the work would continue, exploring the creation of a permanent organization to support future assemblies and track progress on childcare initiatives. The Montrose experience showed how deliberative democracy can generate practical solutions while building the relationships and civic trust needed to address future community challenges.

"At the beginning, I felt uneasy since I didn't know what to expect. At the end of the process, I felt that I had learned how to listen to other people's perspectives and that helped me understand a different side." – Ana, Montrose, Assembly participant, Colorado, USA.

Source: Unify America; www.unifyamerica.org

REMIT –UNDERSTANDING

The next step is to spend time thinking about the remit. Each participant will need to interpret what the remit is asking of them, what aspects of it they need to address, and how this will shape any solution they recommend. This is an opportunity for the group to seek clarity around what they are deciding on, and if there is anything ‘off limits’.

➡ STEP 2: WORKING IN SMALL GROUPS

REGULARLY MIXING SMALL TABLE GROUPS

The primary tool you will use for a public judgment (deliberation) is regularly mixing small groups. Small groups (5-6 people) allow a mix of voices, more time with information, and close relationship building. Through the project, you should make use of small groups to cover lots of information at the same time, to generate many ideas at the same time, and to work together on refining ideas at the same time.

You should regularly mix groups to help support dialogue and identify common ground across a diverse set of participants. This also helps to ensure that participants do not accidentally or intentionally form cliques. You should make sure to pay attention to group dynamics to ensure, for example, people are getting along or whether there are dynamics limiting productivity. Mixing groups up between exercises keeps things energised and allows you to distribute different social styles and demographics evenly. Having a good mix of task-based and people-based social styles in a group can ensure they stick to the time instructions while also going into detail, for example.

➡ STEP 3: BRINGING IN INFORMATION

INFORMATION (WRITTEN)

One way participants will receive information is through written material. You cannot expect everyone in a group to read everything. This is a shared learning exercise where participants will cover what is most interesting to them and share their



Top: A deliberation session of the Gipuzkoa General Assembly - Basque country, Spain. Supplied by: Ione Ardaiz Osacar

Bottom Left: A deliberative polling plenary session in Mongolia.

Bottom Right: India: Assembly members developed and listed recommendations on different aspects of the remit using the technique of “station rounds”, supported by facilitators. Photo credit: Prasanna Desai

newfound information with others. You should design exercises around the idea of ‘shared learning.’

Briefing booklets or information kits: The first source of information for participants will be their briefing book or information kit. Whatever form this background material comes in, it will be the primary reference material for most of the process. Participants should be spending some time in the room sharing the learning task by flagging key learnings, the most useful pieces of information (or anything that they want to question), and anything that changes the way they have thought about the problem. Done in small groups, each group reports back to the whole on what was most interesting and also, what they doubted or wanted to challenge.

Wider engagement reports: Another source of information will be from other forms of engagement that have been held on this topic. This includes survey results and online feedback. The aim here is to give the group an insight into how the wider community feels while giving them context on what the method was. You should deliver on a promise that those citizens (from the wider engagement) are being listened to by other people like them.

Submissions: A common way to receive feedback from the wider community is to make a submission process available to anyone and actively distribute it to active interest groups known to the government. This allows anyone interested in the process to have a direct line to the participants. One way of improving the usefulness of submissions is to provide a template that offers 3-4 questions that submitters answer.

- Who should participants hear from to become informed?
- What questions should participants ask of expert speakers?
- What is your answer to the remit?
- What do you think participants should consider? Why?

These questions draw useful pieces of information from the community without requiring the participants to read through pages and pages of free-form opinion on the topic.

Requested additional information: Fundamental to any mini-public-like deliberation is the ability for participants to ask questions, receive answers, and request information from sources of their choosing. The best way to do this is for participants to make information requests and ask questions and provide answers between meetings. In small groups, they should

find agreement around information gaps, what questions they need answering, and who they trust as a source. This allows the government agency (primarily the body answering most questions) the time to gather all the answers and provide them before the next meeting. The group should be clear about their questions and why they are asking them.

INFORMATION (SPEAKERS)

Participants will also receive information through expert speakers in the room. The method you choose will depend on how much time you have, the kind of information being presented, and ultimately, what the group prefers. One method is ‘speed dialogue,’ an exercise where speakers sit in small groups and quickly answer questions, rotating speakers every 10 minutes or so. This ensures there are many parallel conversations happening at the same time, increasing the amount of information the group can absorb at one time.



Participants of the Citizens Assembly focused on local climate resilience and sustainable development in traditional communities in Bujaru, Para state Brazil (2024) ©Marina Lima. Supplied by Silvia Cervellini.

Another method, which will be useful when cost or location is difficult, is through an online video call (Skype, Zoom, etc.) If you have the space, you can put a remote speaker on a laptop in another room, allowing them to take part in a speed dialogue. Otherwise, you will need to change the format of speakers' presentations to accommodate someone speaking remotely. Sometimes, information can only effectively be presented through the use of visual aids, and this works best when presenting to the whole group at once (takes more time but ensures the information is communicated clearly).

When choosing speakers, you must place a strong emphasis on transparency by explaining how you arrived at the set of speakers you are presenting. This can take the form of a 1-page document that explains who is presenting, how they were chosen, and why they were chosen.

Government speakers: At the beginning of a process, it is important for the government or sponsoring agency to share the problem and key background information in a short presentation (guideline: 30-40 minutes speaking and a similar time for questions). This is best done by managers who are hands-on with the problem and who can share their experience.

Government-nominated speakers: Additionally, the government may want to nominate speakers they think the participants should hear from. These should provide a diversity of views on the topic and not be a panel of speakers all supporting the government's position on any given issue. This means that you may need to be involved in curating the selection to ensure a diversity of views is present.

For transparency, facilitators should always make clear why a speaker is there, i.e., who selected them and what their background is.

Stakeholder/interest group-nominated speakers: One way of harnessing stakeholder input into the process is to give them the task of choosing a diversity of speakers to present to the group. The emphasis here is on the balance of views, and stakeholders agree to the whole panel. The motivating question here is "Who should they hear from in order to make an informed recommendation?"

Assembly member-nominated speakers: After hearing from organisation and stakeholder-nominated speakers, the group now

has the chance to choose speakers to fill information gaps they have identified for themselves. You should ask them: What information is missing? And who do you trust to give you this information? One way of ensuring there is a diversity of views presented to the group is to nominate speakers in pairs who have differing views on an issue or contested piece of information.

INFORMATION AND TRUST-BUILDING – DIALOGUE WITH KEY DECISION MAKERS

At the outset, participants should have an opportunity to ask questions of key decision makers who are giving their authority to the process. This is an important step because it builds trust within the group that their recommendations will be taken seriously. They will ask questions like: Why are you undertaking this process? What will you do with our recommendations? How can we trust that you will not go back on your word? You should close this loop at the conclusion of the process to reinforce the commitment made.

INFORMATION –“SENSEMAKING”

The first half of any deliberation is making sense of the information. Participants should be given a lot of time to interrogate information, ask questions, receive answers, and ask follow-up questions. The shared learning exercise takes time and cannot be rushed. Participants will push back on any attempt to restrict information. To a participant, this can look like you're not letting them see the complete picture or pushing them in a certain direction.

The primary emphasis at this phase is to refer back to critical thinking and biases training that they have gone through and ensure they are hearing from a diversity of sources.

Participants do this after every piece of information given to them. This means that the beginning of the process is a constant back and forth of gathering information and then making sense of the information.



CASE STUDY

NEW ZEALAND

BUILDING COOPERATION ON CLIMATE ADAPTATION BETWEEN DIFFERENT INDIGENOUS GROUPS

Overview: The Porirua Assembly on Climate was a ground-breaking initiative that brought together two parallel groups or chambers: one made up of the general Porirua community (north of Wellington), and one for mana whenua –the Indigenous people with traditional authority over the land, in this case, Ngāti Toa Rangatira. This dual approach reflected a key aim: to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the founding agreement between Māori hapū (sub-tribes) and the Crown, by upholding tino rangatiratanga (Māori self-determination) and ensuring equity in public voice.

The Project: Held over five Saturdays from February to May 2025, the Assembly aimed to explore how communities could respond collectively to climate change. The general community group included 44 participants randomly selected to represent a cross-section of Porirua. The mana whenua group was designed according to tikanga (custom), with open invitations to any iwi (tribal) members, and shorter, more flexible sessions. Both groups addressed a shared question framed slightly differently on living well in a changing climate.

The Assembly heard from scientists and Māori leaders-who shared both technical insights and mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge systems). Another key information source was the inclusion of rangatahi (youth) as young as 8 years of age, via a creative workshop that produced ideas that fed directly into final recommendations. Three young people from the workshop came to join the

Assembly full-time, contributing to a rich intergenerational dialogue.

Indigenous co-design was at the heart of this project, making it possibly the world’s first Indigenous-led climate assembly. The process moved at the “speed of relationship,” respecting Māori values and customs, which required flexibility and openness to new ways of working. This approach ensured mana whenua had genuine political authority and decision-making power throughout.

The Porirua Community Leaders Forum, founded by Ngāti Toa, commissioned the Assembly and now holds responsibility for follow-up action. While formal government responses are pending, community momentum is already visible: with food-growing initiatives, climate action groups formed, and Assembly participants running for local council.

The Results: The Assembly was a response to growing concerns in Aotearoa New Zealand about democratic decline, marked by low voter turnout, mistrust in institutions, and the sense that political systems are failing to address complex, long-term issues like climate change. The assembly delivered six themed recommendations on issues like reforestation, waste, transport, and community resilience. These were formally received by local and regional councils, who committed to transparent follow-up.

The Assembly attracted significant public and media interest, with over 15 news articles nationally and coverage in academic arenas inspiring other regions and Indigenous groups internationally to consider similar models of inclusive, treaty-based climate decision-making.

“The best chance we’ve got is to listen. The power of this approach is to create a safe place where a lot of ideas can be shared and if everyone’s listening, we can draw on that collective wisdom.” – Helmut Modlik, Tumu Whakarae/CEO Ngāti Toa Rangatira, Porirua Community Leaders’ Forum, 25 May 2024

Source: Te Reo o Ngāa Tāangata / The People Speak; www.thepeoplespeak.nz

➔ STEP 4: GENERATING IDEAS

The next phase of a long-form deliberation is idea generation. Coming up with initial solutions to a problem can be a difficult part of the process. Some participants will still want to seek more information, yet this can be counterintuitive because sometimes, more information does not lead to more clarity. At some point, the group will need to stop collecting more information and start working with the information they have to generate ideas. We are aiming to make them informed citizens, not subject experts.

The primary focus at this stage is clarity of intent. This phrase should motivate all the recommendations that are produced. The aim for the group is not to describe exactly **how** something should be done, but instead, to be clear about **what** they would like to happen and **why**. Communicating the ‘why’ ensures that the organisation understands the reasoning behind the recommendation and can flexibly apply this same reasoning to other aspects of the issue. Strict recommendations that focus on “how” can restrict problem solving by being inflexible when circumstances change.

IDEAS GENERATION – ENCOURAGE DISSENT, MAKE SURE PEOPLE KNOW THE LAST CALL FOR IDEAS

Coming up with ideas can be easy for some groups and hard for others. You should encourage them to focus on clarity of intent and to stay away from wish-list recommendations that do not factor in any trade-offs required to make something happen.

Ideas generation exercises should start broadly. People should be encouraged to disagree and come up with competing ideas. Remember to refer back to work agreements, critical thinking, and biases training, to ensure the group works together cohesively.

It is important to be clear about when the final call for ideas occurs. Once you move beyond this point, you cannot go back to idea generation. If you are not clear, and someone misses an opportunity to make their recommendation, you risk losing the trust of the group.

PRIORITISING AND COMBINING IDEAS

Are there any ideas that are similar or could be combined into one recommendation? Once the group has generated ideas, they should look to combine and group recommendations into themes. Logically organising recommendations into topics or themes can help give the final report a clearer narrative.

➔ STEP 5: WRITING AND REVIEW

Writing recommendations is an iterative process. You should start from basic ideas and add more details step-by-step. This means that at each point, the group can reflect and add clarity to the purpose of a recommendation before splitting into groups again and working in parallel.

COLLABORATIVE WRITING

The task of writing an entire recommendations report that can be supported by the group requires parallel work. Participants will need to split up, refine recommendations, and ultimately write them into their report at the same time. There are different methods for this, but most centre on the use of templates that ensure each recommendation is in the same format.

This can be as simple as 3 headings:

- **Recommendation** (approx. 2-line summary of what they want to say)
- **Rationale** (longer explanation of why with a focus on clarity of intent),
- **Sources or evidence** used to support the recommendation.

These headings focus on being precise with language, noting that the more complexity introduced into a recommendation, the higher the chance of it being misinterpreted. Any template should be a ‘light touch’ to avoid being leading –the example here is just 5 words suggesting the type of content.

Technology can help dramatically with this process. Online documents can allow many groups to contribute to the same document at the same time. Otherwise, you will need to come up with a method for integrating all the different recommendations into the same document.

The key point here is to write in bullet points. These are easier to add and delete as you work toward an agreement.

REVIEW

Agreement on what is and is not in the final report requires the group to test the recommendations with one another. There are many different methods for this that can involve facilitation techniques ranging from “dotmocracy” (fast process) to sociograms (an involved process that gets immediate feedback on recommendations).

The focus of the review stage is on agreement and clarity. You should be asking the group questions about what might need to change to get the required amount of support from the group. At this point, the group should not worry about grammar and tiny mistakes in recommendations. The intent is to capture whether or not the recommendation has support (not the way the recommendation is written).



Participants of The Skopje Climate Assembly, North Macedonia (2024).

➡ STEP 6: TESTING DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

SPONSORING ORGANISATION FEEDBACK ON DRAFT

One of the best ways to test whether recommendations are clear is to pass them to the decision maker and get feedback. This is most useful when the organisation can give clear comments on how they interpret each recommendation and what it would mean if it was implemented (this can only be done at the request or with the consent of the citizens). Some key things to keep in mind are whether a recommendation has a high cost or complex trade-off that may not have been considered, or whether a recommendation is outside of the jurisdiction of the sponsoring agency.

The focus here should remain on clarity of intent. If the feedback indicates that a recommendation is not doing what it was intended to do, then it will need to be reworded in a way that captures both the intent and the why of the recommendation, so that it is not misinterpreted by the organisation.

➡ STEP 7: FINAL REVIEW AND REWRITE

REWRITE

Once the group has feedback, they can revisit their recommendations and make any changes. You should remind them that they do not need to write long and complex recommendations; their focus is on clarity of intent.

REVIEW

Rewritten recommendations will need to be reviewed by the whole group to ensure their original intent has not been lost in the rewrite.

REWRITE

If any adjustments or corrections are required, the group can split into small work groups to complete their final rewrite or clean-up of each recommendation. Final emphasis on clarity of intent.

➡ STEP 8: FINAL AGREEMENT

TESTING THE SUPERMAJORITY

Once the final rewrite is complete, the group will need to step through each of the recommendations and ensure there is a super-majority (or whatever threshold you're using for group agreement) on each and every point in the report. This is best done with a quick raise of hands and a count. If any recommendation is on the borderline, you can have a discussion about minor changes, but this late into the process is not the time to do major rewrites of any recommendations (this should have been completed previously).

Minor changes are crucial to getting people 'over the line' and supporting recommendations enough to include them in the final report. The key thing to keep in mind at this point is that any adjustments should not change the intent of a recommendation. Keep reiterating this to the group.

Depending on the size of your group, you may need to use some different tools to help speed up the process of testing each recommendation. One method is to have small groups deliberate and decide whether to support a recommendation. If a majority of groups support a recommendation, then it passes. Streamlining this process loses the nuance of minor changes, so it should be used with large groups under time constraints.

You can also make use of digital polling software that allows participants to immediately vote on a recommendation. This will speed up the 'hand count' process and allow for a fluid voting dynamic where people can change while having a conversation about tweaks and changes.

The core of this step is that you are ensuring you have agreement and consent that each recommendation has sufficient support from the group to be in the report.



CASE STUDY

JAPAN, SUGINAMI CITY

BUILDING A ZERO CARBON CITY

Overview: In 2024, Suginami City in Tokyo held a Citizens' Assembly aimed at engaging local residents in the development of climate policy under the municipality's "Zero Carbon City Suginami" initiative. Taking place over six months, the assembly brought together approximately 50 citizens from a wide range of ages and backgrounds. This initiative marked a significant step toward addressing one of the central challenges of contemporary climate action: integrating expert knowledge with the lived experiences and values of the community.

The Project: The Citizens' Assembly was a structured and carefully facilitated process initiated by the local government. Each of the six sessions, held monthly and lasting about three hours, was designed to enable informed, inclusive, and constructive deliberation among participants. Citizens examined ways to reduce local greenhouse gas emissions and promote sustainable practices within their communities.

Information sessions were crafted to go beyond abstract data, presenting climate issues in ways grounded in the everyday realities of participants' lives. Panel discussions brought together diverse perspectives, ensuring that no single voice dominated the narrative. One innovative feature was the introduction of a "flag" system that allowed participants to request expert input on-demand during deliberations. This approach helped maintain the participant-driven nature of the discussions while still ensuring access to technical expertise when needed.

Facilitation was another key strength of the process. A dedicated team of facilitators coordinated closely before each session, consulting experts on the issues to be discussed in the next session and engaging pre-session planning to address emerging needs in the group. Considerable attention was also paid to creating a psychologically safe space where participants felt comfortable expressing differing or dissenting views, even given the political sensitivities surrounding climate issues. The assembly's success was underpinned by strong political leadership. The initiative was a key pledge in the mayor's electoral manifesto, and the administration demonstrated a clear and ongoing commitment to the process.

The Results: The recommendations sought to promote local adoption of renewable energy and community power generation, while fostering regional cooperation and providing accessible information. Waste reduction and recycling advanced through initiatives like the Suginami Recycling Lab, local food waste systems, and everyday reuse practices were also recommended.

Even after the assembly concluded and the recommendations were submitted, the local government continued working to reflect these proposals in actual policy, setting an example of how sustained political will can support participatory governance.

Source: jrfminipublics.wixsite.com

MINORITY REPORTS

If there are recommendations that do not receive enough support, but some participants feel that decision makers would benefit from seeing, then a minority report can be included in the final report. This is a recommendation that clearly explains that it did not reach the required level of support to be included as a recommendation, but that a minority held a certain view. This can be useful information for the decision maker to keep in mind while not taking the place of a full recommendation.

The minority is not a one-person exercise. At least 10% of people (preferably more) should be supporting each point.

PANEL FINALISE RECOMMENDATIONS

Once each recommendation has been agreed upon, the group can now finalise the report by nominating, or writing together, an introduction that tells a quick narrative of the process. The idea to keep in mind at this point is that someone picking up the report at the bus-stop or in a local café should be able to understand what the process was to arrive at this report (i.e. Who wrote it? What was the question? Who did they hear from? How did they agree? What do I need to know?).

TAKING THE REPORT BACK TO THE COMMUNITY

The group should discuss the commitments they will make to share and talk about this experience as a way of scaling the impact of their work. A small amount of time brainstorming ways they can increase their impact can inspire new and easy ideas.

➡ STEP 9: PRESENTATION AND CLOSING

Wrapping up a long deliberation often involves the decision maker reiterating their commitment to the authority they gave the participants at the outset. They will obviously not have had time to read the entire report already, but an affirmation of the process keeps that trust between participants and decision makers.

Participants should be given their own opportunity to reflect on the process. A good way of doing this is by allowing each person

to say a few words while everyone stands in a circle. This is often a useful affirmation of the integrity of the process.

➔ STEP 10: POST EVENT

PRESENTATION TO THE DECISION
MAKER BY PARTICIPANTS

The group should decide for themselves who they think should present the final report. At most, 3 participants should give a quick speech recapping the process and telling the story to decision makers. This is a powerful aspect of the process because it is a chance for everyday people to speak directly to decision makers on a topic that they have spent a lot of time learning and deliberating on. It conveys the ability of everyday people and gives additional weight to the recommendations in the report.

POST-DELIBERATION SURVEYS

This survey should be very similar to the pre-deliberation survey-- it is an interesting measurement of how the participant's views have changed. You should also ask additional feedback questions around the process for learning and improvement. These processes can always adjust for their local context, and learning what does and does not work from people who have participated, is the best way of adjusting.

RESPONSE BACK FROM DECISION
MAKERS TO PARTICIPANTS

Decision makers should close the loop for participants by providing an in-depth response to the recommendations report. It should clearly explain what the government's response is to each recommendation, whether it has been accepted, and what will happen with each recommendation from here. Clear communication about why each decision has been made and on what points the decision maker agrees with the participants is important for broad public trust in the process.



CASE STUDY

REPUBLIC OF
NORTH MACEDONIA

FINDING COMMON GROUND TO
TACKLE SEVERE AIR POLLUTION

Overview: The Skopje Climate Assembly was the first in-person citizens' assembly held in North Macedonia, organised by the Zip Institute, addressing the urgent issue of air pollution in one of Europe's most polluted cities. Skopje's severe air quality problems stem from deep-rooted socio-economic and energy challenges, including heavy reliance on fuelwood for heating due to energy poverty.

The Project: The Assembly brought together 65 randomly selected people from diverse households, who would come to hear from over 30 experts to craft actionable recommendations targeting energy, transportation, and public health.

During the Assembly two different formats were used to gain a deeper understanding of some of the root causes of air pollution. Focus group discussions were held with energy-poor minority groups (mainly Albanian-speaking firewood users and women from a rural community within the city limits of Skopje), to ensure that people from the margins of society were able to express their perceptions of the problem and to identify their strategies for coping with energy poverty. A group Delphi (a structured, iterative process) with experts from civil society and academia was also held to identify controversial issues that might be of particular interest to discuss with the participants.

The Results: At the time of voting, many recommendations put forward received unanimous support by members of Skopje City Council including the expansion of the environmental inspectorate workforce; integrating the current railway infrastructure into Skopje's public transportation system, and a call to implement a systematic, intensive, and consistent street cleaning regimen.

The report of the Climate Assembly Skopje was handed over to the newly elected Prime Minister of North Macedonia, Prof. Hristijan Mickoski, by one of the participants, Eleonora Jovanovikj, at the Macedonian Energy Forum in June 2024.

By empowering citizens to influence policy through deliberative democracy, the assembly not only fostered inclusive decision-making but also set an inspiring precedent for tackling environmental and public health crises in the Western Balkans. Lessons from the Skopje Assembly have been documented into a Toolkit, and there are preparations in place for five more climate assemblies in North Macedonia in 2026.

Source: The Zip Institute; zipinstitute.mk



Chapter 07

PARLIAMENTARY AND INSTITUTIONAL MODELS

**“ONE CAN CERTAINLY ENTRUST
SENSITIVE ISSUES TO THE
CITIZENS’ ASSEMBLY, EVEN IF
THEY ARE EXPLOSIVE.”**

FABIENNE COLLING, ECOLO PDG MP, EAST
BELGIUM, MARCH 24, 2025

THE NEXT STEP: EMBEDDING DELIBERATION IN POLITICAL PRACTICE

Most of this Handbook has focused on Citizens' Assemblies as individual projects. This chapter profiles some of the approaches taken by parliaments and departments to have a longer-term model. A key benefit of this is the iterative learning and refinement of process approaches based on what is learned through practical experience.

BELGIUM: DELIBERATIVE COMMITTEES IN THE BRUSSELS PARLIAMENT

In December 2019, Brussels became the first legislature in the world to create permanent deliberative committees that mix elected representatives and randomly selected citizens, formally integrated into its rules of procedure, and supported by a detailed operating guide. This is now part of the parliament's regular and permanent operation.

For the 2019-2024 legislature, the Brussels Parliament was motivated to act on the 'democratic fatigue syndrome' identified by David van Reybrouck -seeking to bridge the growing gap between representatives and the represented. It sought a method that would open the doors to all inhabitants of the region.

The Brussels Deliberative Committees are a pioneering example of what happens when you stop asking "How do we consult people?" to start asking "How do we share decisions?". The central idea is to combine 15 Members of Parliament (the standard number in a Standing Committee) and 45 randomly selected citizens, assign them a shared issue to tackle, give them information, allow them to deliberate and follow this up through a pre-agreed accountability mechanism.

HOW IT BEGAN

In 2017, the Green Party in Brussels launched a citizens' assembly to help shape its electoral programme. This assembly produced two core recommendations:

01

Create citizens' assemblies at all levels of power.

02

Use a mixed approach that combines elected officials and randomly selected citizens to avoid an "us vs. them" dynamic and to maximise follow-up on decisions.

As a result, the Greens made a formal proposal to institutionalise 'mixed committees' in parliament; however, as they were in opposition, the proposal was rejected.

In 2019, the Greens joined the governing majority and negotiated the creation of deliberative committees directly into the government agreement.

A dedicated parliamentary committee was then set up to work out the design and operating rules. Crucially, compared to the situation in 2017, this process involved both majority and opposition MPs, which ensured cross-party buy-in from the start.

By December 2019, the reform was adopted embedding deliberative committees permanently in the rules of procedure. No longer just an experiment, they became part of the institutional fabric of Brussels' democracy.

HOW IT WORKS IN PRACTICE

TRIGGERING A COMMITTEE

A deliberative committee is created by the Parliament to address a clearly defined topic. Most topics are chosen by the parliamentary assembly itself, but citizens can also trigger a process, typically through a formal proposal backed by signatures.

COMPOSITION

Each committee brings together two groups:

- **Citizens:** 45 people selected through a two-stage random-selection process: first, a random draw of ten thousand addresses, followed by stratified selection to ensure sociodemographic diversity (age, gender, education, geography, language, and with scope for a variable linked to ensuring a mix of perspectives on the topic at hand).
- **Elected MPs:** 15 parliamentarians selected from the standing parliamentary committee that normally handles the subject at hand, which ensures that discussions are anchored in real legislative work.

DURATION AND FORMAT

The work unfolds over a minimum of five days, usually held on weekends to make participation easier. Sessions alternate between:

- Information phases with expert hearings, stakeholder testimonies, and balanced briefing materials provided in advance.
- Deliberation phases with small group discussions (7-8 people) and plenary debates, allowing participants to explore perspectives, test ideas, and build consensus.

FACILITATION AND SUPPORT

All meetings are professionally facilitated to ensure equality of voice, respectful dialogue, and productive exchange. Participants receive clear, balanced documentation before the process begins, which helps to level the playing field between citizens and MPs. The facilitation is contracted out, but in the long term, the Parliament aims to employ in-house facilitators.

DECISION-MAKING

At the end, members draft recommendations together. Citizens vote by secret ballot, while MPs vote publicly as part of normal political accountability.

FOLLOW-UP AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The committee's recommendations are formally transmitted to the Parliament. Elected MPs are obliged to debate and respond to each recommendation within a set timeframe (currently six months). A public follow-up report is then published to track which proposals were adopted, modified, or rejected, and explain why.

VALUE AND IMPACT

While the recommendations are not legally binding, they carry strong political weight. The process is designed to integrate citizen expertise directly into the legislative process and make policymaking more inclusive, informed, and legitimate.

WHAT HAVE THEY WORKED ON?

Over just 26 months, six deliberative committees were held in Brussels. Topics spanned 5G deployment, homelessness, urban biodiversity, noise pollution, apprenticeship reform, and citizen roles in crisis response. Each time, the recommendations were nuanced, practical, and directly informed by people's lived experiences.

The range of topics tackled, and the impact of these committees prove the extent to which citizens can engage meaningfully on complex policy challenges.

WHAT MAKES IT WORK?

Several design choices and political commitments underpin the success of Brussels' Deliberative Committees:

Blending citizens and elected MPs: These committees place citizens and MPs on an equal footing. This format encourages genuine encounters and deliberation as peers: while this helps MPs better understand citizen priorities, citizens get the opportunity to appreciate institutional realities and constraints.

Better Informed decision-making: Participants benefit from inclusion in expert hearings, balanced debates, and access to multiple, sometimes even conflicting, perspectives before making recommendations. This ensures that decisions are grounded in both evidence and lived experience.

High-quality deliberation: Professional facilitation ensures respectful dialogue, active listening, and the search for common ground. The design allows every voice to be heard while avoiding dominance by a few participants.

Legitimacy and transparency: The process is public, with clear rules and traceable decisions. Parliament is obliged to respond to each recommendation within a fixed timeframe, which prevents the exercise from becoming merely symbolic and reinforces political accountability.

Institutionalised democratic innovation: Unlike one-off citizens' juries or ad hoc panels, these committees are embedded in the Parliament's regular operations. This institutionalisation builds a habit of participation and sets a precedent that can inspire other bodies. Lessons from one committee feed into the next to create a culture of continuous improvement.

Inclusion by Design: From the start, the process was designed to remove barriers to participation for those furthest from politics, using measures such as paying participants, offering childcare, "buddy" support systems, multilingual measures, and other practical measures to ensure that diverse voices can take part.

WHAT HAVE PARTICIPANTS SAID?

Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Citizens describe the experience as transformative, both in how they see politics and how they see themselves.

MPs have praised the quality of the recommendations and the tone of the debates. Evaluations show that 95% of MPs say citizens contributed constructively, while 82% of citizens report a better understanding of the political system.

Brussels is a very diverse city, with multiple fault lines (linguistic, economic and social, digital, etc.) that tend to overlap. Brussels is therefore faced with a problem of strong dualization, and polarisation of needs and points of view.

The deliberative commissions often bring together very divergent interests (nature vs. housing in the deliberative commission on biodiversity; comfort of life vs. economic activities in the deliberative commission on noise, etc.). However, the measures taken in terms of information, inclusion and deliberation make it possible to initiate debates on divisive issues in a calm climate.

For example, when asked orally about their feelings at the end of the deliberative commission's work, many citizens were delighted



Plenary session at the German Parliament's citizens' assembly on Nutrition
– the participants vote by show of hands. Germany (2019) © Deutscher Bundestag
/ Robert Boden / Mehr Demokratie

with the opportunity for dialogue with others that they would otherwise never meet because they live in different neighbourhoods or come from different social backgrounds. They also reported appreciating the absence of confrontation, co-construction of recommendations, and the exchange and evolution of ideas.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Although the process is primarily a parliamentary initiative, the Brussels regional government has also committed to following up on the recommendations.

Because the model is institutionalised, it has evolved through a learning-by-doing approach. Adjustments have already been made based on evaluations after each committee, which led to improvements in aspects such as transparency, facilitation, and follow-up mechanisms.

The model is now firmly part of Belgium's institutional landscape, and four other parliaments have already amended their rules to create similar tools. Interest has also been strong internationally. Countries from across the globe have expressed curiosity about the Brussels model, and numerous presentations have been organised to share the approach and inspire adaptation elsewhere.

A key future challenge may be financial sustainability. In a difficult economic climate with budget cuts on the horizon, political leaders will need to decide whether to commit long-term funding for the process.

Furthermore, to truly advance democratic innovation, some argue it will be essential to create "citizenship leave". This would create a legal provision to allow participants to take time away from work to participate, similar to the status granted to members of a jury in criminal courts. This would help ensure participation is not an extra burden on top of daily work, but a fully supported civic duty.

For more information about the Brussels Parliament Deliberative Committee:
www.democratie.brussels/assemblies

BELGIUM

THE OSTBELGIEN MODEL – A ‘BOLT-ON’ OPTION FOR LOCAL AND REGIONAL GOVERNMENTS

In recent years, declining trust in political institutions has emerged as a pressing challenge across many democratic societies. In response, the German speaking Community of Belgium (Ostbelgien) has developed a pioneering and institutionalised model of citizen participation known as the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue. This initiative is designed not as a temporary or experimental measure, but as a lasting structure intended to strengthen the democratic process by embedding deliberative practices within the formal architecture of governance.

Established in 2019, the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue aims to address three interrelated goals: to actively involve citizens in political decision-making, to make political processes more understandable and transparent, and to enhance public support for political decisions. Through direct engagement, citizens are offered a deeper understanding of how political decisions are made. Participation in deliberative processes allows individuals to experience the complexity of political life—researching a topic thoroughly, engaging in structured debate, and collaboratively drafting policy recommendations. This involvement fosters a greater appreciation for the democratic process and helps to increase the perceived legitimacy of public decisions, ultimately contributing to stronger and more resilient democratic institutions.

The structure of the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue is composed of two interconnected components. The first is the Citizens' Assembly, which forms the deliberative core of the process. Each

year, a new Citizens' Assembly is convened to consider a specific policy issue. Between 25 and 50 citizens are randomly selected to ensure broad social diversity and inclusion. These assemblies meet over approximately five working days, typically spread across multiple weekends, to study the issue, deliberate collectively, and produce a set of policy recommendations. Since the initiative's inception, six Citizens' Assemblies have been held. They have addressed a wide range of topics, including health care, inclusion in education, housing, digital skills, the integration of migrants, and pupils' competencies. The recommendations formulated by these assemblies are formally submitted to the Parliament and relevant public authorities for consideration and action.

The second component is the Citizens' Council; a permanent body composed of 24 former participants of previous Citizens' Assemblies. The Council plays a central coordinating role. It is responsible for selecting topics for future assemblies, overseeing the organisation and quality of the deliberative process, and monitoring the implementation of the recommendations. It meets once a month, typically on Saturday mornings. By maintaining continuity and facilitating follow-up, the Citizens' Council ensures that the deliberative process is not one-off or disconnected but rather embedded in an ongoing democratic cycle.

The legal foundation for the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue is provided by the decree of 25 February 2019, passed by the Parliament of the German-speaking Community. This decree gives the initiative a solid legal and institutional basis, enshrining the Citizens' Council as a permanent body within the parliamentary framework. In addition to formal recognition, the initiative is supported by a dedicated budget and staff within the Parliamentary Administration, ensuring it has the resources required for long-term operation.

A defining feature of this model is the rigorous follow-up process that ensures the recommendations of the Citizens' Assemblies are treated with seriousness. The legal framework mandates public sessions for the presentation of recommendations, gives the Citizens' Council the right to question politicians about implementation progress, and obliges Parliament to provide transparent, detailed, and comprehensible explanations when recommendations are not adopted. This follow-up mechanism is crucial for maintaining accountability and building trust between citizens and institutions.

"I was very sceptical before, because I've always viewed citizen participation from a somewhat vague perspective: Is it perhaps a token of participation? Are people truly willing to involve citizens? Or do they simply want to say they've heard the citizens, just to tick the box? But here, I have the feeling that people are truly willing to participate, to listen, and then to respond to the citizens' wishes."

– Jennifer Buchem, Assembly member, Ostbelgien ‘Student Competencies - Emotional Skills’ Citizens Assembly.

Source : [Parlament der Deutschsprachigen Gemeinschaft Belgiens; www.pdg.be](http://www.pdg.be)

GERMANY

AGENCY FOR CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN THE STATE OF BADEN- WÜRTTEMBERG: PROVIDING A SUPPORT STRUCTURE

The State of Baden-Württemberg in Germany has taken an innovative step by creating a permanent, systemic support structure for any public authority seeking to implement deliberative processes.

This new infrastructure addresses a long-standing challenge: while interest in deliberative democracy has grown, individual public authorities often lack the expertise, time, or resources to design and deliver high-quality participatory processes. The Agency's mission is to drastically lower these practical barriers, enabling deliberative democracy to become a realistic and routine part of governance across the state.

The Agency offers four core services:

01 EXPERT ADVICE AND PROCESS DESIGN

Public authorities can receive tailored, practical advice to help design deliberative processes that are appropriate to their goals, context, and capacity. This ensures that processes are both feasible and fit-for-purpose.

02 ACCESS TO A POOL OF PROFESSIONAL FACILITATORS

The Agency manages a vetted pool of 23 expert facilitation providers—among the most experienced in Germany and beyond. Through a pre-negotiated master agreement, the Agency streamlines the procurement process, removing administrative burdens from public authorities while ensuring high-quality, cost-effective service.

03 OFFICIAL SPONSORSHIP AND PROCESS STEWARDSHIP

Upon request, the Agency can take formal responsibility for a deliberative process. This is particularly valuable in politically sensitive situations, as it helps public officials avoid potential role conflicts and demonstrates impartiality and professionalism.

04 FINANCIAL SUPPORT FOR SMALL MUNICIPALITIES

Recognising that small and medium-sized municipalities (under 20,000 inhabitants) often face financial limitations, the Agency offers co-funding to support the implementation of deliberative processes in these communities.

By offering this suite of services, the Agency removes many of the logistical and institutional barriers that have historically discouraged the use of deliberative methods in public decision-making.

ENABLING WIDESPREAD ADOPTION

Since its inception, the Agency has supported dozens of municipalities, regional authorities, and ministries. Within its first year of operation, it enabled approximately ten citizens' forums-mini-publics based on random selection-to be conducted. Beyond these, it has supported a broad range of formats, including information markets, strategic planning initiatives, and even deliberative processes feeding directly into law-making.

A key feature of the Agency's work is its emphasis on avoiding duplication of effort. As a central competence centre, it prevents individual authorities from "reinventing the wheel" or repeating known pitfalls. Instead, it promotes shared learning, consistent quality, and standardised procedures.

LEGAL FOUNDATION: THE LAW FOR DIALOGIC CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The Agency operates under a robust legal framework-the Law for Dialogic Citizen Participation (2021). This pioneering law regulates all aspects of random selection for public purposes, ensuring that deliberative processes using randomly selected citizens (such as citizens' assemblies) are grounded in transparent, fair, and standardised procedures.

As such, when deliberative mini-publics are organised, the Agency guarantees top-tier methodological integrity. Its procedures ensure demographic diversity and inclusion, strengthening the democratic legitimacy of the outcomes.

PROFESSIONAL FACILITATION AND RAPID DEPLOYMENT

The pool of facilitation firms managed by the Agency allows for rapid deployment of professional support. The master agreement in place not only facilitates speed and efficiency but also guarantees competitive pricing and quality assurance for public authorities.

This professional backbone enables deliberative processes in Baden-Württemberg to be delivered at scale, with consistency and fidelity to best practices in deliberative design.

The establishment of the Agency for Citizen Participation in Baden-Württemberg marks a shift from experimentation to institutionalisation. It reflects a deliberate choice to embed deliberative democracy into the everyday machinery of governance. By providing expert support, streamlining logistics, offering financial assistance, and formalising processes under a legal framework, the Agency makes citizen participation both accessible and impactful.

This model offers a compelling example for other regions and countries seeking to build permanent infrastructure for deliberative democracy. It demonstrates that with the right support systems in place, deliberative engagement can become not the exception, but the norm.

“Anyone who values people’s trust in politics and their understanding of the complexity of political decisions cannot avoid citizen participation.”

– Winfried Kretschmann, Minister-President of Baden-Württemberg

Source: Agency for Citizen Participation Baden-Württemberg; www.servicestelle-buergerbeteiligung.de

IRELAND

AN INDEPENDENT AUTHORITY DRAWN FROM THE OFFICE OF THE TAOISEACH (PRIME MINISTER)

HOW IT BEGAN

Ireland first experimented with deliberative democracy in the wake of the Great Recession. Governments turned to the model both to break political deadlocks and to rebuild public confidence after the economic bailout, at a time when institutional trust was rapidly declining.

Over the past decade, the model has steadily evolved. Each assembly has adapted to lessons from its predecessors, reflecting a process of co-creation between citizens, civil servants, and political actors, and gradually shaping a model now recognised internationally.

In general, issues make it onto the agenda through political party manifesto pledges that are incorporated into a Programme for Government. They are often issues that have proved intractable for the policy system or where there are large inter-or intra-party differences. Occasionally, opposition parties succeed in placing an issue on the agenda through a legislative amendment as a Bill moves through parliament.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONVENTION

In the aftermath of the 2011 general election, Ireland established the Constitutional Convention to explore constitutional reform. The Convention built on 'We the Citizens' (2011), a pilot initiative led by academics with philanthropic support to demonstrate the potential of citizen deliberation.

The Convention was included in the Programme for Government with a dual purpose: to address longstanding constitutional questions - most notably marriage equality -and to reconnect the public with politics. Established by parliamentary resolution in July 2012, it was tasked with examining eight specific topics, including reducing the voting age, the presidential term, women's role in politics and in the home, same-sex marriage, electoral reform, blasphemy, and parliamentary reform. The Convention also chose to examine economic, social, and cultural rights.

Drawing on the example of the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform, it became the first constitutional deliberative mini public of its kind, bringing together politicians and randomly selected citizens in a hybrid format. While not without criticism, most evaluations judged the process a success. Several recommendations were implemented, with the most significant outcome being the referendum on marriage equality -ultimately passed by popular vote. This set the precedent for future assemblies.

THE CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES

The model advanced further with the creation of the Citizens' Assembly in July 2016, again established by parliamentary resolution and reflecting Programme for Government commitments. Its agenda was shaped by election pledges, coalition negotiations, and international pressure to act on climate change.

Unlike the Convention, which had blended 33 MPs and 66 randomly selected citizens, the Assembly was made up solely of everyday people. It consisted of 99 randomly selected citizens and an independent chair - a Supreme Court judge appointed by the Prime Minister. This design reflected political realities: abortion was a deeply divisive issue, and the citizen only format enabled it to be formally considered outside the adversarial dynamics of parliamentary politics. A second key factor was that

the initial 'blended' model had given politicians confidence in the format to allow later iterations to run solely with citizens.

The Assembly was tasked with five issues: the Eighth Constitutional Amendment (abortion), an aging population, fixed-term parliaments, referendum conduct, and climate change.

Concluding in April 2018, the Assembly directly influenced the referendum that repealed the constitutional abortion ban. While views on the referendum outcome will differ, the deliberative process itself received international acclaim with the Assembly widely viewed as a landmark project in the evolution of democratic practice.

A majority of the assembly members supported changes to the Constitution and replacing it with a provision empowering the Oireachtas (Parliament) to legislate on termination of pregnancy. The Assembly also endorsed broad grounds in favour of legalising abortion-ranging from risks to physical or mental health, rape, or fatal foetal abnormalities-to unrestricted access in early pregnancy.

Acting on these recommendations, a referendum was held on 25 May 2018, in which the public voted decisively to repeal the Eighth Amendment; around 67% backed repeal, enabling Parliament to regulate abortion.

Subsequently, the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 was passed, legalising abortion-particularly up to 12 weeks of gestation with further provisions-with full legislative authority granted to the Oireachtas. This process stands as a landmark in deliberative democracy-demonstrating how a bottom-up citizen forum can open new venues for public debate and constitutional reform on deeply polarising issues.

Subsequent assemblies adopted the 2016-2018 model but focused on single topics, which was a response to time pressures. The Citizens' Assembly on Gender Equality, announced by the Prime Minister in June 2019, was exceptional in that it was not tied to a Programme for Government but rather followed recommendations from the Parliamentary Joint Committee on Justice and Equality.

The Gender Equality Assembly also faced unprecedented challenges: initially scheduled for six months, its work was suspended after its first meeting due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It later resumed online across eight sessions, becoming the only Irish assembly to be conducted virtually.

The 2020 Programme for Government introduced three new assemblies: on Biodiversity Loss, Dublin's Directly Elected Mayor, and Drugs Use. The Biodiversity and Dublin Mayor assemblies ran in parallel in 2022-the first time two assemblies operated simultaneously. The Drugs Use Assembly followed in 2023. The current coalition government has not committed to convening further assemblies.

MEMBERSHIP

The Constitutional Convention had 100 members: 66 randomly selected citizens, 33 politicians nominated by their parties, and one independent chairperson. Parties were represented in proportion to their strength in parliament, and Northern Irish parties were invited to nominate representatives. Citizens were selected from the electoral register.



Assembly members contributing ideas to a mural as part of the Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss Ireland (2022)

The Citizens' Assembly moved to a citizens-only model, particularly because of the abortion debate. Later, the Assembly on Biodiversity expanded membership further by including all residents of Ireland, not just citizens, and brought the selection process in-house, rather than outsourcing to private firms.

GOVERNANCE

Since the Convention, assemblies have been run by a Secretariat, housed in an independent office, and created afresh for each process and often staffed by officials from the Department of the Taoiseach (Prime Minister). The Secretariat, led by a Secretary, manages all logistics and procedures.

The Chairperson serves as the public face of the assembly, moderates sessions, and ensures its smooth functioning. Appointed by the Taoiseach, the Chair remains independent.

Expert input has also evolved. The Convention used a single generalist advisory panel, whereas the Citizens' Assembly introduced rotating experts tailored to each issue. Later assemblies on Gender Equality and Biodiversity relied mainly on academics but widened the pool of voices. The Drugs Use Assembly innovated further by combining academics, practitioners, and advocates with lived experience. A dedicated Lived Experience Group ensured those directly affected had a voice in deliberations.

Finally, the Steering Group, first introduced during the Convention, remains a voluntary member-led structure that assists in planning, operations, and feedback.

PUBLIC INPUT

Public consultation has become a hallmark of Irish assemblies, extending expertise beyond invited speakers. Submissions are made available online and used in group discussions. The 2016 Citizens' Assembly set the benchmark, receiving more than 13,000 submissions on abortion. While later assemblies attracted fewer, the practice became institutionalised. In some cases, such as the Gender Equality and Drugs Use assemblies, public input was explicitly mandated. In others, like Biodiversity Loss, it was maintained as good practice.

OFFICIAL RESPONSE

Once the Citizens' Assembly has finished its work, the Secretariat prepares a draft report that sets out the findings and recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly. The finalised report is then provided to the members of Dáil and Seanad Éireann, and a copy is also provided to the Taoiseach.

Generally, a Committee of the Oireachtas is assigned responsibility to examine the report and recommendations and provide a detailed response.

Once the Oireachtas Committee has completed its work, the Government also provides a response to the report and recommendations, indicating which of the recommendations it intends to accept and outlining how it will go about implementing those recommendations.

SUMMARY

Over a little more than a decade, Ireland's Citizens' Assemblies have become a defining innovation in democratic practice. They have addressed some of the country's most divisive and complex issues, influencing constitutional change, shaping public debate, and inspiring similar experiments worldwide. Though their future depends on shifting political priorities, the assemblies have already left a lasting legacy: embedding deliberation into Ireland's democratic repertoire and demonstrating the power of ordinary citizens to shape national decision-making.

Source: Ireland Citizens Assembly Secretariat; www.citizensassembly.ie

FRANCE

UPDATING AN EXISTING INSTITUTION TO DELIVER A CITIZEN VOICE

The Economic, Social and Environmental Council (CESE) is recognised in the 1958 French Constitution as the Republic's third assembly. Unlike Parliament, its legitimacy comes not from elections but from its role in representing organised civil society. Its 175 members are drawn from more than 80 organisations, including trade unions, employers' associations, environmental groups and civil society organisations.

The CESE advises government and parliament on economic, social and environmental policy, evaluates public policies and maintains links with regional, European and international institutions. It can be referred matters by government or parliament, initiate its own inquiries, and since 2008 has also been able to consider issues raised through citizen petitions. Over time, it has developed a reputation as a forum for dialogue between diverse interests and for producing recommendations based on consensus-building and deliberation.

A significant transformation occurred in 2021 when legislation formally established the CESE as France's central institution for citizen participation. The reform reflected growing interest in deliberative democracy and followed high-profile processes such as the Citizens' Convention for the Climate. Rather than replacing its existing role, citizen participation was integrated into the CESE's advisory function, creating a bridge between organised civil society and the broader public.

One of the CESE's most important innovations has been the use of citizens' conventions. These bring together randomly selected citizens who reflect the diversity of the population and support them through a structured process of learning, expert hearings, deliberation and recommendation development. Conventions have been used to address issues ranging from climate policy to end-of-life care and children's wellbeing. Their purpose is to enable citizens to engage deeply with complex questions and provide informed recommendations to decision-makers.



Young people aged 12 to 17 involved in the CESE's assembly on the mental health of children and young people, France. April 2025. Photo: Katrin Baumann, CESE.



Plenary session of the Citizens' Convention on the End of Life, France. January 2023. Photo: Katrin Baumann.



CASE STUDY

FRANCE

THE CITIZENS' CONVENTION ON END-OF-LIFE: AN INNOVATIVE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS AT THE CESE

Overview: Citizens' conventions organised by the French Economic, Social and Environmental Council (Conseil économique, social et environnemental – CESE) are deliberative democracy processes that bring together randomly selected citizens for a series of working sessions held over several months, to address major societal issues.

At the request of the French Government, CESE organised the Citizens' Convention on End-of-Life between December 2022 and April 2023, marking an important milestone in public debate on a highly sensitive bioethical issue.

The then Prime Minister, Élisabeth Borne, referred the matter to the CESE with the question: "Is the current framework for end-of-life care adapted to the various situations encountered, or should changes be introduced?"

To answer this question, 184 citizens were randomly selected to reflect the diversity of the French population (age, gender, region, type of living environment, socio-economic background, and level of education). Their mission was to learn, deliberate, and produce informed proposals for public authorities.

The work was carried out over nine three-day sessions, amounting to 27 days of collective deliberation.

The process began with a learning phase where participants received background materials on the issues at stake, shared personal experiences, and engaged with experts and stakeholders holding diverse perspectives, including medical, legal, philosophical, civil society, and religious voices.

The second phase centered on deliberation. Participants deliberated the complex and often contested issues in depth, carefully considering different viewpoints and areas of disagreement. Further expert hearings were organized in response to participants' requests, providing additional information and clarification where needed.

Finally, the harmonisation phase consolidated the Convention's work into a coherent final framework. Participants agreed on the main strategic directions in response to the core question and prioritised the key findings and recommendations under each. The process also produced a "range of viewpoints" document, ensuring that disagreements and minority perspectives were transparently reflected in the final report submitted to public authorities.

Outcome: The final report was submitted to the President of the French Republic and other public authorities. After 69 hearings and extensive deliberation, 75.6% of participants supported the legalisation of assisted dying, alongside recommendations to strengthen support for patients and families and improve access to palliative care. The Convention's recommendations informed institutional debate, and a legislative proposal reflecting some of them was under parliamentary review in 2026. The process demonstrated how structured citizen deliberation can contribute to policymaking on a deeply divisive issue.

Source: CESE, www.lecese.fr

"The CESE has become the institution within the Republic that knows how to listen to citizens and enable genuine deliberation."

– Thierry Beaudet, President of the CESE, 2021 to 2026, for Ouest France, 04/14/2026

The 2021 reforms also expanded the CESE's use of participatory tools. Citizens can now place issues on the institution's agenda through petitions, contribute through large-scale digital consultations, participate in working groups and serve on citizen panels that operate alongside the CESE's committees. Deliberative workshops are also conducted in communities across France to ensure local perspectives are heard, including from groups that may not normally participate in public decision-making.

Together, these reforms have transformed the CESE from a consultative body into a broader participatory ecosystem. Citizen participation is no longer an occasional activity but is increasingly integrated into the institution's core work.

To support this shift, the CESE established a dedicated Citizen Participation Department in 2022. The department oversees citizens' conventions and other participatory processes, develops expertise in sortition and deliberative design, and helps ensure that citizen contributions are incorporated into the institution's formal advice.

The CESE has also invested in building internal capability. More than 50 staff members have been trained to facilitate deliberative processes, allowing many participation activities to be delivered in-house. This has reduced reliance on external providers while helping to embed a deliberative culture throughout the institution.

The French experience demonstrates how citizen participation can be institutionalised within an existing constitutional body. Rather than relying solely on one-off assemblies, the CESE has developed permanent structures, expertise and processes that allow citizen participation to become a regular part of public decision-making. For jurisdictions seeking to move beyond isolated deliberative projects, the CESE provides one of the most advanced examples of an institutional model for participation and deliberation.

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

EUROPEAN CITIZENS' PANELS

European Citizens' Panels are a democratic innovation that involves citizens directly in EU policymaking by giving them the opportunity to formulate recommendations for the European Commission to consider when shaping policies and initiatives. The panels have addressed cross-border issues such as climate action (energy efficiency, food waste), social cohesion (tackling hatred in society, learning mobility), digital transformation (virtual worlds), and priorities for the EU budget.

Each European Citizens' Panel brings together about 150 randomly selected EU citizens from all 27 EU Member States. To ensure that panels reflect as far as possible the EU's socio-demographic composition, the process ensures that recruitment is representative of the EU diversity (according to 6 criteria: geographical origin -nationality considering urban/ rural location; level of education, occupation, gender, age and the attitude towards the EU). Participants deliberate for three weekends (two in-person and one online) in a structured, facilitated process (in a plenary and smaller working groups) designed to ensure diversity and meaningful discussion.

Tested on a large scale during the Conference on the Future of Europe, where four Panels of 200 citizens each formed a central part of this unprecedented participatory process (2021-2022), the pan-European Citizens' Panels are now embedded in the Commission's policymaking process. They lead to the adoption of a Citizens' Report annexed to the (legislative) proposal, explaining how the Panels' recommendations are taken into account in this process. After the panel, the European Commission organises a feedback event to inform participants about the impact of their recommendations and how they influenced policy proposals, while a regular Newsletter informs all Panellists about new activities and follow-up to previous Panels. The recommendations also serve as inspiration for the Commission's future work and policymaking.

The European Citizens' Panels represent a major step towards a more deliberative democracy at the pan-EU level by engaging European citizens beyond elections. In July 2024, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, in her Political Guidelines for the Next European Commission 2024 -2029,



CASE STUDY

EUROPEAN UNION

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN BIODIVERSITY GOVERNANCE: THE EU POLLINATORS INITIATIVE

Overview: The Young Citizens Assembly on Pollinators was an initiative of the European Parliament, implemented by the European Commission, to strengthen youth participation in biodiversity governance. Between September 2025 and March 2026, 100 randomly selected young people from across the European Union gathered over three in-person sessions to develop recommendations on addressing the decline of wild pollinating insects – a critical challenge for biodiversity, food systems, and ecosystem health.

While the importance of this topic is acknowledged at the political level, the implementation of policy responses confronts many trade-offs and bottlenecks. For instance, one of the dilemmas identified and tackled by the Assembly focused on funding in the context of transition towards more pollinator-friendly farming: How to distribute costs and risks of the transition across different actors (farmers, food chain companies, consumers)? Where to focus incentives (supply or demand side) and what form should they take? In this regard, an important part of the learning phase of the Assembly were the stakeholder debates that gave Assembly members insight into the positions of key interest groups.

To ensure inclusivity in the Assembly, simultaneous interpretation in 23 EU languages was provided during all in-person deliberations, supported by AI translation tools for asynchronous chat exchanges and online meetings. To increase their ownership of the process and agency over shaping it, Assembly members were

also involved in taskforces – voluntary co-design groups that shape such aspects of the process as communication, design and follow-up.

Result: The process resulted in a set of 32 recommendations on pollinator protection and biodiversity governance.

Beyond the policy focus, the Assembly was a pilot process for a possible permanent mechanism of youth engagement at the EU level on biodiversity-related topics.

"I feel convinced that young Europeans care about the protection of environment, including the protection of pollinators. It is essential to maximise our efforts to create a platform, which will allow their active engagement in democratic processes and discussions. Young citizens are buzzing with own creative and constructive reflections, which should be incorporated into debates within decision making processes. After all, we are creating laws for current and future generations. We try to create the best laws for them, and so they should not be staying out of the picture."
– Martin Hojsík, Vice-President of the European Parliament

Source: https://citizens.ec.europa.eu/young-citizens-assembly-pollinators_en



The Citizens' Assembly on the Binnendijle River in Belgium were asked to hear the voices of non-humans and were invited to imagine themselves as a plant, animal, or other living being along the river. © City of Mechelen

announced: *"We now need to embed citizens' participation across the EU. Every year, we will choose policy areas and proposals where recommendations from a European Citizens' Panel would have the greatest value."*

The European Citizens' Panels have shown that their impact goes beyond the policy recommendations they produce. A notable set of "collateral benefits" includes participants sharing, sometimes for the first time, a genuine feeling of being European citizens and being connected with people from across the continent. This is coupled with a sense of empowerment: some participants leave with greater confidence in their ability to contribute to shaping Europe's future, and some have gone on to engage more actively in civil society initiatives or even political life in their home countries. Moreover, the Panellists become part of an Alumni Network, and about one third of them have agreed to become Citizen Engagement Ambassadors. Such outcomes demonstrate that the panels not only inform decision-making but also nurture active citizenship and a democratic culture.

As one participant from the Panel on the New European Budget said, *"For me, this was one of the most important experiences in my life as an active citizen. I felt that I was not just a spectator but a true participant, and that my voice was genuinely heard. The Panel gives space to voices that might otherwise be marginalised."*

Source: European Commission On Behalf Of The European Union



Young people from 23 countries were assembled by the European Commission to provide input into biodiversity governance.



Residents of Olen in Belgium combine their lived experience with newly gained technical knowledge to provide input into the local municipality's future mobility plan. Photo supplied by: Els De Groof, Municipality of Olen, Belgium.

CONCLUSION

WHERE TO FROM HERE?

Deliberative democracy is a constantly evolving field, and today the pace of change feels particularly rapid. This Handbook has focused on one practical democratic tool: bringing everyday people together, giving them time, information and support, and asking them to exercise public judgement on decisions that matter.

The experience of citizens' assemblies demonstrates that ordinary people can engage with complex public issues when they are given the opportunity to do so. At a time when trust in institutions is under pressure and public debate is often reduced to competing slogans, deliberative processes create space for citizens to learn, reflect and reach considered judgements.

NEW TOOLS, NEW POSSIBILITIES (AND CHALLENGES)

The environment in which citizen participation takes place is changing rapidly. Digital participation platforms, new forms of online engagement, deliberative technologies and AI-enabled tools are opening up new opportunities to broaden participation, improve accessibility and support public decision-making.

Used well, these innovations can help more people contribute to democratic processes. They can support outreach and recruitment, enable participation across geographic distance, improve accessibility, facilitate translation, and help participants and organisers navigate large volumes of information.

KEEPING HUMAN JUDGEMENT AT THE CENTRE

The value of these tools depends on how they are used. The legitimacy of deliberative processes comes from citizens themselves. Technology can support learning, participation and

deliberation, but it should not replace the human judgement that gives these processes their democratic authority.

The challenge for practitioners and public institutions is therefore not whether to embrace innovation, but how to do so responsibly. New technologies should strengthen the core principles that underpin effective citizen participation: representation, access to information, transparency, inclusion, meaningful authority and informed public judgement.

The tools will continue to evolve. Democratic principles should remain constant.

START THE JOURNEY BY GETTING IN TOUCH

Our aspiration with this Handbook has been to show you a useful new democratic tool to complement what you already do today to engage with citizens.

One of the enduring challenges of democratic governance is creating space for considered public judgement to prevail over short-term reactions, misinformation and scare campaigns. This Handbook aims to show how citizens' assemblies can help meet that challenge.

Opinion polls, by definition, ask people what they think without giving them time to think. There are few democracies with an institution that puts people with different views in one room and then gives them the time and resources to think it through. That simple change can unlock our democracies, and in so doing, help you achieve what you entered politics to get done.

We aim to inspire, illustrate successes and learnings, and share practical advice so you start this journey. **We encourage you to take a first step by contacting any of the organisations in this handbook to help you on the journey.**

Citizens want to be heard. Let's meet that challenge.

newDemocracy Foundation, Australia.

About The newDemocracy Foundation

The newDemocracy Foundation is an independent, non-partisan research and development organization dedicated to improving democratic decision-making through citizen participation and deliberation. Working with governments, communities, and partners, it helps design innovative processes that give everyday people a meaningful voice in public decisions

About UNDEF

The United Nations Democracy Fund (UNDEF) partners with civil society to advance human rights, strengthen democratic participation, and promote good governance worldwide. Through innovative, locally led initiatives, we help protect civic space and foster inclusive, resilient societies. Learn more at un.org/democracyfund.

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