

HOW TO ORGANISE A CLIMATE ASSEMBLY: FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

So, you think you want to organise a climate assembly?

Where are you on your journey?

Are you trying to promote the idea of a climate assembly?

Or are you thinking about commissioning a climate assembly?

Or has the decision been made to run an assembly and you are trying to find guidance about what to do next?

Below we offer some responses to Frequently Asked Questions from those thinking about running an assembly and those who have been asked to organise one.

The Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) has co-created extensive practical guidance with members of the network. See <https://knoca.eu/guidance/>.

Two types of practical guidance are available: Quick Reads and longer Guidance Documents

KNOCA Quick Reads and Guidance Documents

KNOCA Quick Reads

- Setting the Remit for Climate Assemblies
- Governance of Climate Assemblies
- Follow-up to Climate Assemblies
- Engaging Stakeholders in Climate Assemblies
- Recruiting Assembly Members by Democratic Lottery
- Selecting and Presenting Evidence in Climate Assemblies

KNOCA Guidance Documents

- Preparing for a climate assembly
- Setting the remit
- Key drivers of impact
- Children and Young Peoples Participation in Climate Assemblies
- Making the Most of Climate Assemblies: Playbook for Civil Society Organisations
- Supporting Members After the Assembly Ends: How to Nurture Action
- Impact Evaluation Framework
- Communicating Climate Assemblies: Enabling Pathways to Impact
- What Next? Embedding Permanent Climate Assembly Infrastructure

KNOCA has also produced a series of [Briefings](#) which are more research focused and a whole series of [Recordings](#) of Learning Calls on national assemblies and Workshops on a variety of different areas of climate assembly practice, many of which led to the creation of [practical guidance documents](#).

If you are considering organising an assembly, here are some questions for you to consider carefully...

Are you sure you want to run a climate assembly?

Climate assemblies are only *one way* of organising citizen engagement and participation on aspects of the climate crisis. Make sure that you are choosing to organise a climate assembly because it fulfils your purposes rather than because you are attracted to the method. Too often people run inappropriate participation exercises which create more problems than solutions.

What is your primary purpose of engaging citizens?

Climate assemblies (and citizens' assemblies more generally) are a really good way of hearing the informed judgements of citizens who reflect the diversity of the broader population. They generate recommendations from everyday people who have learned about an issue and the views of their fellow citizens. A climate assembly is a deep (rather than broad) form of participation. It involves a relatively small number of everyday people who go through an intense process of learning, deliberating and coming to recommendations.

Climate assemblies are an excellent way of bringing the collective judgement of citizens into policy decision making by public authorities and have been used effectively by civil society organisations to open up areas for public debate.

If your primary purpose is to engage a larger number of people in learning about or taking action on climate change, a climate assembly is not the best approach.

It's also a really bad approach if you have already made a decision on what you going to do!

What political conditions need to be in place for a climate assembly?

There is no point organising a climate assembly when you already know what you want to do. Climate assemblies work well when the scope for policy development is still open. They are especially valuable when there are clear trade-offs and politicians are not sure which course of action to take. This can be at different stages of the policy cycle – for example, a climate assembly can be used to generate policy recommendations or to appraise policy options.

Climate assemblies organised by civil society organisations can be used to increase pressure on politicians to act and to show the willingness of citizens to make the necessary tough judgements.

Citizens' assemblies have often been used to break political deadlock – where politicians cannot agree or do not know how to progress or are concerned about the willingness of people to support action.

Assemblies commissioned by public authorities need a degree of support from across the political spectrum that this is a good approach to take. If major political actors who can exert a veto are not willing to participate, this can cause a problem. That said, sceptical actors often engage once the assembly is up and running – they do not want their perspectives to be ignored and, once they see the assembly members in action, often become committed to the process.

How can I build political support for a climate assembly?

One of the best ways to overcome scepticism or hostility to citizens' assemblies is to organise briefing sessions with organisers, observers and members of climate assemblies in other countries. Politicians, civil servants and civil society organisations are more likely to listen to their peers: people like themselves who have direct and positive experience of assemblies. KNOCA can help organise such exchanges.

Stressing the non-partisan and diverse nature of members of assemblies selected by stratified random selection can help, along with the creation of an advisory or steering group that includes key stakeholders of different political persuasion and with different views on the topic. See [KNOCA Quick Read Governance of Climate Assemblies](#).

How do I begin?

The KNOCA Guidance [Preparing for a climate assembly: guidance for policy officials](#) is particularly relevant for this question.

Bring in expertise early, both on climate policy and deliberative processes.

Assemblies are generally organised by specialists in deliberative processes so that they have a degree of independence. Advisory bodies are usually created which oversee the process to ensure its independence and fairness. See KNOCA Quick Read [Governance of Climate Assemblies](#)

Independent practitioners are typically commissioned through competitive tender. This allows you to make judgements between different approaches and designs proposed by vendors.

Check out [Key features of a climate assembly](#) to learn more about the different elements of the process.

How do I select the question for the assembly?

You shouldn't be thinking of running an assembly unless you have a relevant question to be answered!

The KNOCA Quick Read [Setting the Remit for Climate Assemblies](#) is particularly useful here.

The assembly needs to be relevant to the current political context. No point running an assembly on an issue that has already been decided or where there is no political resonance.

The question needs to be one that is recognised as important by people on different sides of the political fence. It must not be openly biased towards one way of thinking.

It needs to be open to different solutions and answerable.

It needs to be tested with people of different political persuasion and interests in the topic.

How much does it cost?

Climate assemblies are not cheap. If you are not willing to pay for a good quality assembly, then don't do it. Other methods of engagement should be considered.

It costs money for a robust random selection process. Travel, accommodation, honorariums and providing support for members are not cheap. Developing and implementing a good design takes time and energy. Even if you are online, you need to include budgets to support those members without relevant equipment, skills or confidence.

Participants need time to work through what are often complex and controversial issues. As a rule of thumb, many practitioners talk about at least 30-40 hours as a necessary time period to deal effectively with challenging issues.

Skimping on any of these items means that you undermine the process.

Really, can't I do it cheaply?

No!

There are other deliberative and participatory processes that may be more suitable to more limited budgets. But to a certain extent, you get what you pay for.

Does it have to be random selection?

Yes! Random selection ensures that you have a diverse body of everyday people rather than those who are already politically engaged. It gives the assembly independence from vested interests and political parties.

Other approaches to recruitment will not generate the same degree of diversity.

See KNOCA Quick Read [Recruiting Assembly Members by Democratic Lottery](#)

Can my organisation facilitate the process ourselves to save money?

It is unlikely that your organisation has the necessary skills and experience. But even if you do, having the assembly run by the public authority or civil society organisation that has an interest in the outcome means that its legitimacy will be too easily challenged.

What are the success factors?

The KNOCA Guidance [Key drivers of impact: unleashing the potential of climate assemblies](#) suggests that three factors are critical to achieving impact: the question (see above); the mandate and follow-up; and the communication strategy.

We know a lot about what makes citizens' assemblies work well. And it is not all about the assembly itself. Good design and organisation of citizen engagement is only half the battle.

Of equal (if not more) importance is the attitude and preparedness of the commissioners. An explicit commitment to respond – along with a timescale – should be part of the initial mandate of the assembly. Work needs to be put into preparing your organisation and others to be responsive to the recommendations of the assembly from the very start of the project. This is not just about the few people directly involved in commissioning the assembly, but those politicians, civil servants and other organisations that may be potentially affected by the assembly's recommendations. Do they know it is happening? Do they know why it is happening? Are they ready to integrate the outcomes of the assembly into their work?

See KNOCA [Quick Read Follow-Up to Climate Assemblies](#)

Commonly overlooked is the importance of a robust communication strategy. How do different stakeholders, organisations and the general public learn about the assembly? See the KNOCA Guidance [Communicating Climate Assemblies: Enabling Pathways to Impact](#).

Where can I learn more about climate assemblies?

You have come to the right place! The aim of KNOCA is to be a place where we can learn what works best in the organisation and delivery of climate assemblies that have impact. Access our resources on our website. Join our events. Organise events yourself and advertise them on the KNOCA website. Work with us to make climate assemblies work well.

A wealth of information can be found beyond KNOCA published by organisations that promote citizens' assemblies (not just on climate). Examples include:

Bureau Burgerberaad & Parkhuis de Zwijger. 2021. Climate Citizens' Assemblies. Aiming for impact: Learning from European practice <https://www.cca-project.org/>

newDemocracy. 2019. Enabling National Initiatives to Take Democracy Beyond Elections, UN Democracy Fund (UNDEF) <https://www.newdemocracy.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/newDemocracy-UNDEF-Handbook.pdf>

OECD. Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions (OECD)

<https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>

And many of the organisations that are part of the international umbrella organisation [Democracy R&D](#).