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Selecting and Presenting Evidence in Climate Assemblies

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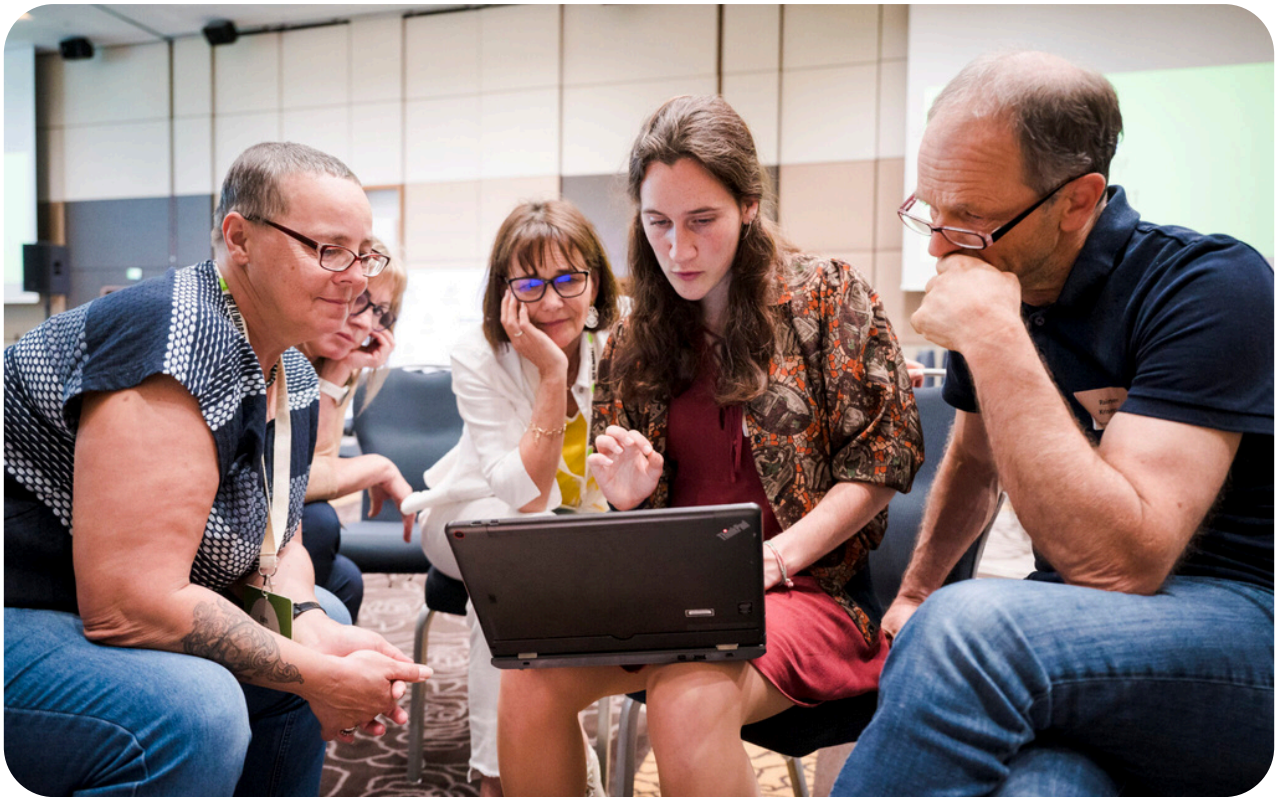
Why is this an issue?

How evidence is selected and presented to assembly members has a profound impact on the integrity of the process and the depth and quality of the recommendations that are produced. Evidence can come from different places: technical experts, stakeholders, advocates, public officials, people with direct experience of climate impacts, and the assembly members themselves. Poor selection of witnesses (sometimes referred to as commentators) can lead to bias and risk undermining the legitimacy of the process. Presenting too much information can overwhelm assembly members who need time to process and reflect. And as assembly members are selected to ensure diversity, different learning styles should be taken into account – not everyone will react well to technical presentations or long documents.



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What have we learned from previous assemblies?

What evidence best supports the work of citizens?

The tendency in some early climate assemblies was to concentrate on providing scientific knowledge to assembly members – and often from natural science (as opposed to social science). While learning about the causes and effects of climate change and potential solutions is important, it is only part of the evidence that is needed to make good decisions about how we live together. For example, social scientific insights into human and institutional behaviour and practices have proven helpful for robust recommendations.

Assembly organisers have also recognised the need to incorporate more than scientific evidence to inform deliberations. Stakeholders, civil servants, politicians, and citizens may all have critical input that can support the assembly's work.

Stakeholder knowledge will often be tied into a particular social and political agenda but can give assembly members understanding of the experience and perspectives of different social groups and organisations and views on the value of different solutions and potential recommendations. Care must be taken to ensure that the different range of stakeholders are heard – especially those that are less well-resourced within society.

Recommendations need to be implementable if they are to be followed up by commissioners and other actors. Providing assembly members with an understanding of political and bureaucratic realities from those working within political institutions can help them to frame recommendations that will land. Again, this needs to be done with care, because political and bureaucratic actors can limit the imagination of members based on their own prejudices about what is possible.

Finally, knowledge directly from citizens, particularly those who are experiencing the effects of the climate and ecological crisis first hand, provides a different type of evidence. Scientists, stakeholders and political actors typically operate some distance from the lived experiences of the most vulnerable. Rather than talking about their situation, it is generally best to hear directly from those involved. And of course, assembly members themselves bring their own lived experience to deliberations. After all, that is one of the main reasons for using democratic lottery: to ensure a diversity of perspectives and experiences are brought to bear on the issue under consideration.

No algorithm exists for deciding the right balance of these different types of knowledge. Organisers need to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of members given the remit they are working to.

How is evidence selected?

Typically, an evidence group is established – sometimes referred to as a knowledge, scientific or expert advisory committee. This is typically populated by academics from universities, supplemented by researchers from think tanks and other organisations.

This can lead to an overemphasis on scientific knowledge to the detriment of other forms of evidence. Thus, the interactions between the evidence group, the organisers and the stakeholder body (see Quick Read on Governance) become important. In smaller, local processes, the different functions of the evidence and stakeholder groups are often integrated into a single body.

Members of the evidence group need to be balanced in relation to disciplinary backgrounds relevant to the remit. Often the selection of members of the evidence group is overseen by the stakeholder body to ensure that they have standing and recognition across the political spectrum.

The power of the evidence group differs across assemblies. In most settings their role is simply to offer advice as to the type of evidence that is needed and on the potential speakers or witnesses best able to provide it. In other settings they may have the power of approval or may themselves serve as witnesses.

In a growing number of assemblies, it is the assembly members themselves who are empowered to make decisions about the evidence they hear.

A tradition developed by Consensus Conferences in Denmark is for members to learn some background knowledge about the issue under consideration and then to decide amongst themselves about the type of additional evidence they would like to hear to be able to respond to the remit.

It is then the role of the organisers, in collaboration with the evidence group, to find relevant speakers. In other processes, assembly members may be offered a list of potential speakers and/or topics from which to choose. The recent Citizens' Assembly on Climate in the Netherlands empowered members even further, giving them the right to make decisions about both the type of knowledge and who would present.

The **Nationaal Burgerberaad Klimaat** (Dutch Citizens' Assembly on Climate) drew on scientific knowledge, knowledge about current policy and knowledge from different societal stakeholders. During the second weekend, assembly members proposed topic areas where they wished to hear more evidence. A group of members elected by the Assembly were then tasked with selecting the 50 witnesses who would present in a one-day meeting, with support and advice from the organisers and scientific advisory group. Their proposals were then voted on by the rest of the Assembly in an online process.

The one-day meeting that followed combined plenary and smaller break-out sessions where members could choose which witnesses to engage with. Witnesses included scientists, those with direct experience of responding to climate change, representatives of interest groups and government officials. All evidence provided to the Assembly was made available on its website.

This highly democratic approach to decision making on evidence provision was driven in large part by the need to respond to climate sceptics amongst the assembly members. They were suspicious that organisers would set the agenda so that competing perspectives on the climate crisis would be excluded. This more democratic approach had the positive effect of building trust in the process and the organisers across the diverse assembly membership.

How to present evidence in the assembly?

In some of the early climate assemblies, members suffered 'death by PowerPoint'. Long presentations by scientists with complicated slides. Given the diversity of members recruited by democratic lottery, including in relation to educational backgrounds, a significant proportion of assembly members will not have further or higher education. For some, their educational experience will not have been positive. For others, their reading age will be low. This means that organisers need to be creative in the way that evidence is presented and digested by members.

Where organisers provide briefing documents for assembly members, the best examples move towards less text and more visual and graphic elements – again to cater for the different learning styles of members.

Organisers should provide advice to witnesses on how best to present key messages through accessible, short presentations. This is a particular skill. A lesson from past assemblies is that too often academics, in particular, have not taken these briefings on board. Great care is needed not only to find subject specialists, but witnesses who are able to present to a diverse audience.

Some organisers have reported fondly about assemblies during the pandemic when presentations were often recorded in advance. That allowed them to either edit or go back to witnesses for a second take.

It is not just the skills and capacity of witnesses to present that is important. Ensuring social diversity amongst them should also be considered. If the diversity of the assembly is fundamental to a citizens' assembly, then there are good reasons for that diversity to also to be reflected in those presenting evidence.

Time to digest

A good rule of thumb is that for every 10 minutes of presentations, assembly members need 20 minutes to digest what they have heard. This can be through both individual reflection and conversation with other members to clarify the relevance of what they have heard and to generate questions where there is still confusion or a need for further input. Many organisers provide assembly members with red cards that they can wave when a witness is not clear in the points they are making or does not explain an acronym.

Some assemblies have moved away from traditional Q&As, where commentators are on the stage and can only answer a small number of questions. One innovation is the carousel, where commentators go to each table to answer specific questions from that group. This reshapes power dynamics, giving members more control of the agenda. Others have had evidence fairs, where assembly members choose who they want to hear from.

Assemblies have increasingly mixed different methods of knowledge provision and reflection, including artistic practices. For example, the Cumbrian Climate Assembly in the UK enabled assembly members to choose between standard textual formats and the use of drama or art materials in responding to evidence.

Transparency of evidence provision

Best practice is to livestream and record evidence provision so that anyone outside the assembly can watch what has been presented. This is typically just the contribution from the witnesses in order not to undermine the anonymity of members. Recordings also enable the assembly members to revisit the evidence they have heard. But it requires resources and so a minimum standard is to at least provide the names and affiliation of commentators and a brief summary of their contribution.

Recommendations

- Carefully select an evidence committee taking into account the views of different stakeholders to ensure that the body is viewed as legitimate.
- Where possible, involve members in the selection of evidence.
- Cater for a range of learning styles through different types of learning activities and presentation formats.
- Ensure witnesses are well briefed and understand the diversity of assembly members listening to them.
- Give plenty of time for reflection, questions and deliberation on evidence.
- Consider inclusion in the selection of witnesses. Where possible witnesses should reflect the social diversity of the assembly itself as well as the diversity of those affected by the topic of the assembly.
- Record videos of evidence. This allows members to rewatch relevant input and ensures transparency to observers outside the assembly.