



# 1. Citizens' Assemblies

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A Citizens' Assembly is a model or mechanism of deliberative democracy that brings together members of the public to deliberate on major policy questions and develop collective recommendations. Citizens' Assemblies are designed to improve decision-making processes in democratic states and are especially useful in dealing with highly polarised, contentious or long-term issues, including climate change. They are usually commissioned by public authorities (at any level), working with other partners such as non-profits or research institutions.



## CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES AT-A-GLANCE

- **Democratic mechanism to enhance citizen involvement in decision-making.**
- **Requires significant human and financial resources, as well genuine commitment from decision-makers to receive and implement (at least some) citizens' recommendations.**



## Benefits

1. Enhances citizen involvement in political decision-making, and can make governance more inclusive.
2. Enriches the wider public debate and encourages informed deliberation on current policy questions.
3. Provides thoughtful policy recommendations and offers a nuanced picture of the decisions citizens would like to see implemented.
4. Can increase trust in democratic institutions and decision-making processes.
5. Helps counteract social polarisation and disinformation.



## Challenges and limitations

1. **Governance:** Despite having many benefits, assemblies are not a bulletproof solution to all governance problems.
2. **Neutrality:** Offering participants unbiased, diverse and inclusive knowledge is a challenging task.
3. **Legitimacy:** The legitimacy of an assembly can be questioned by wider society if the process is not well run or well communicated.
4. **Trust:** The process may be seen as a tool for public relations or legitimisation of policies already in place or being considered. In this case, it also risks decreasing trust levels.

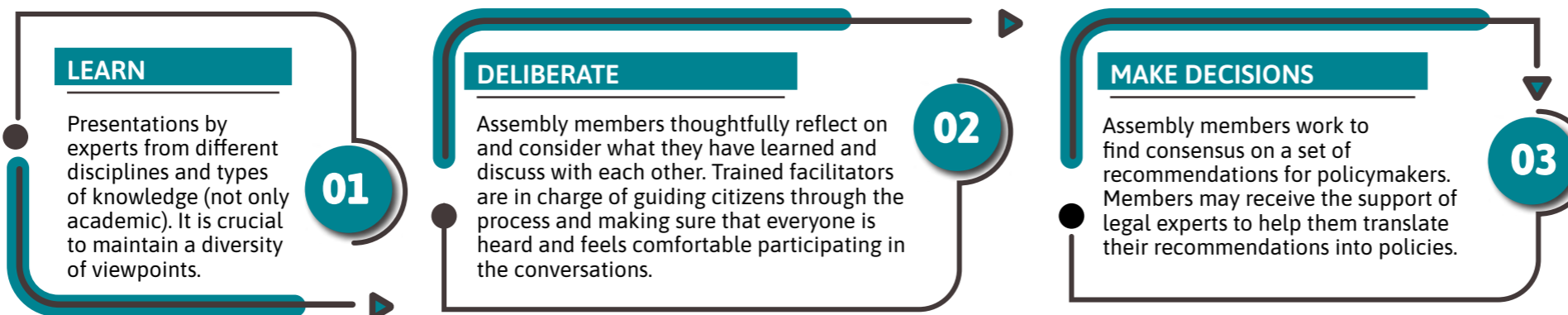


## Participants

Citizens' Assemblies involve a random sample of participants, which is usually stratified (e.g. involving individuals from every age bracket, gender or socioeconomic class) in order to try to represent a given population. The selection process needs to be handled with extreme care for the sample to be as representative as possible.

## STEPS

*In some cases, a consultation process takes place prior to the Assembly, in which the wider public can propose some topics to be discussed.*



Most Assemblies include at least the following in their governance structure:

- **Advisory group:** Researchers and practitioners in charge of guiding design and implementation. The **facilitation and note-taking group** can be part of this group or another independent group.
- **Knowledge group:** Selects experts for the learning phase (step 1) so that it is as comprehensive as possible. In some cases, members of this group also review recommendations.
- **Secretariat:** In charge of logistics.

**Timeframe:** Citizens' Assemblies require a significant amount of time (on average ~20 days) for citizens to deliberate on the issue at hand, as well as preparatory work and report writing. They may for example take place over one weekend per month for up to a year.



## OUTCOMES AND IMPACT

The main outcome is a report of detailed recommendations drafted by Assembly members, and directed to public institutions and authorities. Depending on the scale of the assembly, the reach may vary (local, national, etc.). The tangible impact of these Assemblies depends on how decision-makers implement (or at least respond) to citizens' recommendations. Additionally, if the Assembly is properly implemented and communicated, it can generate a wider social debate, fostering social learning and deliberation on the policy issue.



## RESOURCES NEEDED

All Assemblies require facilitation skills, organisational skills and active listening. In addition, in-person Assemblies require a venue and equipment for streaming plenaries. Online or hybrid Assemblies require a virtual platform for online discussions, software for online meetings, electronic equipment for vulnerable participants, as well as online training in managing these devices.



## ONLINE/OFFLINE

Citizens' Assemblies have been conducted in-person, online and with hybrid formats. However, having some sessions in person (at the beginning and/or the end of the process) is recommended.

## LEARN MORE

- [participedia.net/method/4258](https://participedia.net/method/4258) - Method: Citizens' Assemblies
- Escobar, O., and Elstub, S., 2017. Forms of mini-publics: An introduction to deliberative innovations in democratic practice. *Research and Development Note*, 4(1-14).
- OECD, 2020. *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave*. Paris: OECD Publishing.
- Sandover, R., Moseley, A., and Devine-Wright, P., 2021. Contrasting Views of Citizens' Assemblies: Stakeholder Perceptions of Public Deliberation on Climate Change. *Politics and Governance*, 9(2), pp76-86.

## REAL LIFE EXAMPLE: Citizens' Convention for Climate

Gathered 150 French citizens in 2019-2020 to deliberate on pathways to achieve an emissions reduction of at least 40% by 2030, in a spirit of social justice. Resulted in 149 policy recommendations to the National Government, [see website for details](#).