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CAST Guidelines: How can citizens' assemblies help navigate the systemic transformations required by the polycrisis?

Learnings and recommendations for practitioners, policymakers, researchers, and civil society

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CAST is a global hub for understanding the systemic and society-wide transformations that are required to address climate change. Based at the University of Bath, our additional core partners are the charity Climate Outreach, the University of Manchester, University of East Anglia and Cardiff University.

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Purpose of these guidelines

These guidelines have been prepared for the [Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations \(CAST\)](#).

These guidelines are intended for policymakers, practitioners, researchers and civil society actors interested in taking a systemic approach to the environmental and social crises facing the planet today. They explore how citizens' assemblies could generate a genuinely transformative response to such challenges by addressing underlying systemic issues.

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Summary

Deeply ingrained systems – economic, political and social – are at the root of the climate and ecological crisis.

Deliberative processes such as citizens' assemblies have so far struggled to address these systemic aspects in the context of achieving genuine social transformations.

We contrast the top-down model of deliberation, so far favoured by policymakers, with a bottom-up approach that sets out to reclaim decision-making processes.

Our recommendations focus on practical ways that future citizens' assemblies can more openly address the underlying issues driving the polycrisis.

We consider:

Ways to acknowledge and tackle the invisible power structures that shape assembly processes

The role of state and non-state actors, including social movements, in citizens' assemblies

How to design processes which integrate a focus on achieving systemic change

The value of drawing out controversies rather than consensus

The importance of allowing citizens the freedom to set the agenda and shape processes

How to enable emotional engagement with deep-rooted and urgent issues

The need to invest effort into wider public engagement and participation, and to rethink approaches to inclusion

The importance of reflection and evaluation as part of the assembly process itself

Introduction

Multiple UN bodies¹ have expressed the urgent need for systemic transformations to maintain the favourable and reliable environmental conditions that underlie modern civilisation. Backed up by social movements^{2 3} wide-ranging issues such as food, travel and consumption are now commonly recognised as crucial to address climate and ecological crises.

However, policy processes have thus far been slow to address these crises with a systems lens. In many countries, there has been little to no progress in reducing emissions or reversing the degradation of nature.

Such inaction has contributed to increasing recognition that deeper social issues such as inequality, polarisation, and even the fundamentals of current political and economic models, are intertwined with environmental degradation in an advancing polycrisis⁴ which includes a crisis of governance.

A global polycrisis occurs when crises in multiple global systems become causally entangled in ways that significantly degrade humanity's prospects. These interacting crises produce harms greater than the sum of those crises would produce in isolation, were their host systems not so deeply interconnected. The core concern of the concept is that a crisis in one global system has knock-on effects that cascade (or spill over) into other global systems, creating or worsening crises there. Global crises happen less and less in isolation; they interact with one another so that one crisis makes a second more likely and deepens their overall harm. The polycrisis concept thus highlights the causal interaction of crises across global systems.

"Limiting global warming to 1.5° Celsius would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society." [IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5C \(2018\)](#)

"Goals for conserving and sustainably using nature and achieving sustainability cannot be met by current trajectories, and goals for 2030 and beyond may only be achieved through transformative changes across economic, social, political and technological factors." [IPBES Global Assessment Report on Biodiversity and Ecosystems services \(2019\)](#)

Citizens' assemblies (CAs) are chief among a range of participatory democratic tools considered to have the potential for addressing the numerous technically and morally complex trade-offs to tackle climate change.

Introduction

As a series of interlocking crises become more salient in the public consciousness, climate citizens' assemblies have gained traction in the past few years as innovative ways to find solutions to them, with new initiatives being announced almost every week⁵. However, many processes in this deliberative wave have struggled to address system-level aspects of the climate and ecological crisis, its connections to other crises and societal issues, or the trade-offs inherent in a transformed, sustainable future.

Guidance on how to design and evaluate deliberative processes on the climate crisis has become available in a short space of time, thanks to networks such as KNOCA⁶. However, few resources are currently available on how to design deliberative processes, climate or otherwise, that open up discussion on the broader systemic transformations that are increasingly recognised as necessary to address many deep-rooted problems.

These guidelines are intended to help policymakers, practitioners, researchers and other civil society actors consider **how citizens' assemblies can address underlying systemic issues** at the heart of a genuinely transformative response to the environmental and social crises facing the planet today.

We focus on **power literacy** as the key element that allows practitioners to understand how citizens' assemblies can grapple with the systemic and deep-rooted aspects of present crises. It illuminates the relationship between citizens' assemblies, power and social transformations through tangible examples, focusing on previous high-profile climate assemblies that we had direct involvement in: the United Kingdom's Climate Assembly (CAUK), France's Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (CCC) and the first transnational citizens' assembly on the climate and ecological crisis, the Global Assembly (GA), as well as other processes such as the Scottish Climate Assembly.

We then explore what learnings, challenges and opportunities these and other experiences reveal, and offer guidance on how both policymakers and other civil society actors might design climate citizens' assemblies to consider possibilities for systemic solutions to the polycrisis.

If you would like to learn more about citizens' assemblies and their strengths and weaknesses in the context of climate change, please see [CAST Briefing Paper 3](#)⁷. For an overview of national climate assemblies in Europe, see [KNOCA's website](#)⁸. For the latest research on global citizens' assemblies, see [GloCAN](#)⁹ website.

2. Climate citizens' assemblies and systemic transformation: understanding power

It is impossible to explore how citizens' assemblies can facilitate systemic transformations without first understanding how societal change happens or is impeded — and particularly in the case of the climate crisis, why there has been limited traction in bringing about meaningful change despite significant scientific, social and political attention.

Power is unavoidably at the heart of this issue, for two reasons. Firstly, not everyone has equal influence over the decisions that orient society's future course. Secondly, some types of influence are more obvious and visible than others. This is important because a shallow interrogation of power can lead to incorrect conclusions about the efficacy of a democratic intervention to facilitate progress on systemic aspects of crises.

There are many ways of analysing power^{10 11 12}. For the purpose of this briefing, John Gaventa's Power Cube¹³ offers a helpful framework to visualise the spaces that influence societal transformation, the levels at which this can occur, and the forms of power each space can have.

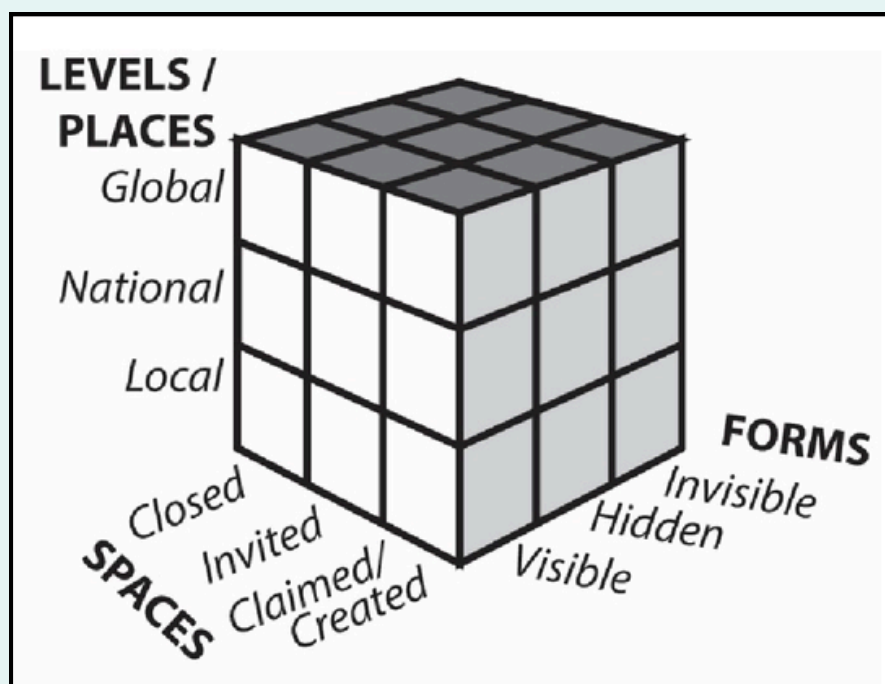


Figure 1: John Gaventa's Power Cube

First, we can think in terms of the different spaces that exist for decision-making. In the case of *closed* spaces, these entail the decisions that governments, once elected, make on behalf of citizens without their further input. Legislation is regularly passed in this way. Urgent responses to emergencies such as the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic would also fall under this category.

Invited spaces are those in which citizens are asked to participate by various kinds of authorities, generally within set parameters. Citizens' assemblies mandated by power holders such as legislative or executive bodies (i.e. Parliament or Head of State) would fall under this category. Government-sanctioned consultations on policy areas are also invited spaces.

Claimed or created spaces, by contrast, are those in which typically less powerful actors come together to shape and act on their own agendas, independent of institutionalised power-holders. These spaces can operate at and have impacts on local, national, or global scales. Protests and citizens' assemblies organised independently of governments are examples of these spaces.

Most importantly for this briefing, spaces can wield multiple forms of power – visible, hidden or invisible. The relatively closed, institutional decision-making spaces of governments have visible political power, potentially leading to the making and implementing of policy. But institutional spaces, closed or invited, also have hidden power, in that decisionmakers can control which actors have a place at the decision-making table, which issues and problem framings are up for discussion and which are sidelined, and how this is done. This political agenda-setting affects how problems are constructed, and therefore what courses of action are proposed.

2.1 Power and 'invited' citizens' assemblies

Typically, citizens' assemblies have tended to be spaces to which people are invited by local, regional or national governments, to inform policy discussion in a visible way. A common assumption is that these invited assemblies are more likely to lead to policy change¹⁴ than claimed spaces because of the formal mandate they get from the commissioning bodies (i.e. a local authority, a parliament or the executive). But while useful, the hidden power of the commissioning bodies to set the agenda and the terms of reference for these spaces often limits their scope, perceived legitimacy and decision-making power. That the power is 'hidden' does not imply it is covert or that it operates in bad faith, rather it tends not to be acknowledged or even explicitly considered by those wielding it.

However, the hidden nature of these exchanges can pose obstacles to dealing with hugely complicated problems such as the present environmental crises. The short-term pressures of electoral cycles may predispose against the implementation, or even discussion, of genuinely transformative changes to social, political and economic systems^{15 16}, because their benefits are unlikely to be realised within the next election cycle. Instead, the options under consideration are likely to involve short-term fixes or trade-offs, particularly for the high-income countries that have benefited most from the Industrial Revolution and colonialism.

The guiding question for the UK Climate Assembly (CAUK), for example, was to explore how the UK should meet its already legislated target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The majority of policy recommendations deliberated on by assembly members were developed by experts in advance of discussions, without any input provided from the assembly members.

This limited the scope of recommendations that citizens were able to propose and framed the issue as a long-term and largely technical matter that did not fundamentally alter social or economic structures, rather than one requiring near-term and urgent action with implications for wider society¹⁷.

Other climate deliberations have incorporated some wider concerns into the guiding question for discussion. For example, the French Citizens Climate Convention (CCC) asked how to reduce emissions “in the spirit of social justice”. However, promises by President Macron of unfiltered incorporation into policy of CCC recommendations were not kept. This blocked some of the CCC’s most transformative proposals, such as regulating advertising for high carbon-intensive products or a 4% annual levy on dividends from large corporations¹⁸.

Industry lobbyists are also likely to attempt to influence the scope and power of citizens’ assemblies that pose a financial or reputational risk to their business, as was the case with the creation of the French Climate and Resilience bill (2021)¹⁹ that was inspired by the Convention Citoyenne’s recommendations. As explained in a report published in 2021 by Observatoire des Multinationales²⁰, various industries embarked on an all-out and ultimately successful lobbying offensive to have the Convention’s recommendations either removed or watered down in the drafting of the final bill, drawing on all their influence and invisible (to wider society) power, including at the very heart of government.

Ultimately, there is a real risk that citizens’ assemblies initiated by power holders lead to citizens’ assemblies that inform but are not able to challenge these power structures. In the worst cases, citizens’ assemblies can end up providing legitimacy to systems and politicians who are looking to maintain the status quo and help them continue to avoid hard political choices²¹. This runs counter to the deep-rooted changes that are needed to address the climate and ecological crisis. Some argue that citizens’ assemblies and other deliberative mini-publics to date have been blind to, and/or complicit in, maintaining the privileges and power structures of Western democratic theory and practice, as well as the dependencies on systems of domination, racialization and exploitation²².

It is therefore crucial for any citizens’ assembly mandated by a power holder that is serious about facilitating deliberation on system change to be aware of these biases and to mitigate against them. At a minimum, this requires awareness building so that citizens possess a sense of their own right to express their voice and to understand the systemic underpinnings of the climate and ecological crisis. It also needs strong capacities for exercising countervailing power against the ‘rules of the game’ that favour entrenched interests. Without this, new mechanisms for participation may be captured by prevailing interests.

In Table 1 (page 12), we highlight elements of different citizens' assemblies that are influenced by hidden or invisible power. We look at two critical components of the design of climate citizens' assemblies: the questions for deliberation and the framing of climate change (i.e. climate discourses) as a means of illustrating how power has operated to shape these processes to date.

We use the following definitions of hidden and invisible power²³ to inform our analysis:

Hidden power: setting the political agenda. Certain powerful people and institutions maintain their influence by controlling who is able to be involved in decision-making and which topics are on the agenda²⁴. These dynamics operate on many levels to elevate the concerns of some groups while excluding or devaluing the concerns and representation of other less powerful groups. They may be both deliberate (e.g. lobbying) or indirect (e.g. the types of witnesses invited to give evidence).

Invisible power: shaping meaning and what is acceptable. Invisible power shapes the cultural and ideological boundaries of participation. Significant problems and issues, or particular framings of problems, are not only kept from decision-making discussions, but also from the consciousness and consideration of the different parties involved, even those directly affected by a problem. By influencing how individuals think about their place in the world using certain framings and language, and by giving a particular slant on society in the context of the climate and ecological crisis, this form of power shapes people's beliefs, sense of self and acceptance of the status quo.



Questions for deliberation

Climate Assembly UK (CAUK)	How should the UK meet its target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050?	The question was set at an early stage by the commissioning Select Committees of CAUK ²⁵ . It was clearly and deliberately aligned with national policy priorities, and was oriented towards practical, actionable responses. It therefore frames the issue as a long-timescale and technical matter, rather than one requiring near-term and urgent action with implications for wider society.
Convention Citoyenne Climat (CCC)	How can France reduce its greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by at least 40% (in relation to the 1990's levels) by 2030, in the spirit of social justice?	The question was negotiated between the civil society group "Gilets Citoyens" and representatives from the government ²⁶ . Reference to social justice enables an acknowledgement of some broader implications. By using the term 'at least' the opportunity was given to the 150 Convention's citizens to go further than 40% reduction GHG emissions. See Table 2 for further analysis of the handling of controversies in CCC. The question nevertheless maintains a framing largely in technical terms, as in the case of CAUK.
Scottish Climate Assembly (SCA)	How should Scotland change to tackle the climate emergency in an effective and fair way?	The Stewarding Group worked on the remit of the Assembly in a half-day deliberative process. ²⁷ According to Oliver Escobar, one of the members of the Stewarding Group, the process of developing the framing question was "dialogic and towards the end deliberative" and "an accommodation across different interests" but "in an ideal world, participants themselves will then have a say in that process as well. But that's not how all of these assemblies are designed just now. This was somewhere in between the ideal and the pragmatic". ²⁸
Global Assembly (GA)	How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?	The question was developed by the Knowledge and Wisdom Committee (KWC) ²⁹ of the GA through an iterative process over several meetings. There was a clear recognition from the Committee that climate change and biodiversity loss had to be tackled together. (Continued on next page).

Global Assembly (GA)	How can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?	<p>This decision was driven by the representatives from Original Nations, indigenous wisdom keepers in the KWC of the GA, and by Professor Bob Watson, former Chair of the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) and Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). With regard to the second part of the framing question, the intention was to support deliberation on the concepts of fairness and effectiveness, and what they meant in relation to the climate and ecological crisis. The purpose of the process was not to come up with specific policy recommendations but to facilitate meta deliberation³⁰ on global justice and goals, as defined by John Dryzek and Ana Tanasoca in their seminal book “Democratising global justice, deliberating global goals”³¹. Nevertheless, this process still entailed a ‘top-down’ decision on what the overall question framing should be, without input from assembly members.</p>
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The framing of climate change (i.e. climate discourses and narratives)

CAUK	Climate change was framed and presented in ways that emphasised scientific and technical framings, at times side-lining the social, moral and political contexts of climate action.	<p>Framing in terms of factual information and technology options risks omitting topic areas which are inherent to tackling climate change, such as questions of political economy, power and influence. This was articulated as a concern by CAUK expert lead Rebecca Willis: “I feel like I should spell [this] out, that as ever in the climate debate, there was a reluctance amongst the organisers and speakers to talk about the... power issues... [There is] the tendency to frame it as ‘which technology should we pick?’, rather than, ‘where does the money and the power and the influence lie, and where does it need to lie, if we’re going to crack this one?’”³²</p>
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(Table continued on next page)

CCC	<p>The mandate of the CCC defined the climate problem in terms of rate of GHG emissions reduction, calling for deliberation on the most polluting sectors of activity. A typology of the Convention's measures was developed by a researcher³³: generic sectoral, technical, frugality, economic regulation and fundamental.</p>	<p>The typology shows that certain formulations of the climate problems have remained dominant. They have favoured the development of measures of a generic sectoral and technical type. For the first two types of measures, called "generic sectoral" and "technical", climate change was understood as a quantifiable problem (e.g. reduction of GHG emission rates). The task for the Convention members was either to opt for different technical solutions (technical proposals) or to contribute their knowledge to improve the way these measures are implemented or to increase their social acceptability (generic sectoral proposals). With the "frugality" and "economic regulation" measures, climate change raises more deep-seated issues of economic and social organisation, and of the definition of freedom: it is a space of ideological and social conflicts. Finally, in the "fundamental" measures, the climate problem is considered in all its emotional and ethical dimensions. The resulting proposals, while less clearly measurable in terms of GHG emissions reduction, have a much more symbolic weight.</p>
Global Assembly (GA)	<p>Discourses advanced in the GA mostly reflected an 'ecological modernisation' perspective: the view that climate change is an outcome of interrelated problems that can be addressed by polycentric governance structures and calls to transition to low-carbon society via market price mechanisms and 'reform-oriented civic environmentalism', placing emphasis on the role of civil society in international governance, calls for North-South equity and generational justice³⁴.</p>	<p>The GA Knowledge and Wisdom Committee (KWC) was an advisory committee formed to provide input on: the framing question that the Assembly deliberated, the selection of experts and witnesses and the content and design of the information materials and learning phase. While the composition of the Committee demonstrated some level of diversity in terms of origins, world views and expertise (e.g. Members of the KWC included two Original Nations wisdom keepers, as well as experts in systems change, transformative economics and critics of capitalism), the evaluation research shows that the committee was relatively homogenous in terms of discourses, which mostly spoke to 'ecological modernisation'. The 'missing discourses' in the Assembly Members' deliberation mirrored these missing discourses in the Committee - for example, discourses on radical critiques of capitalism and the current political economy were absent.</p>

Table 1: Elements of citizens' assemblies that are influenced by hidden or invisible power

2.2 Invisible power: a new function to explore for citizens' assemblies

Given institutions' track record on environmental action to date, it is prudent to assume that without external pressure, in most cases, institutions will not design citizens' assemblies with the capacity to address systemic transformations and/or will cherry-pick their recommendations and leave the most transformative ones aside.

Invisible power is likely to exert a crucial and as yet largely unexplored role in inhibiting citizens' assemblies as tools for systemic transformation. Invisible power manifests in how citizens think about their place in the world, including how and to what degree they should participate in societal decision-making. It represents the broader cultural, psychological and ideological context within which political agendas are set and decisions are made.

This invisible power has profound implications for how citizens' assemblies are set up and how they are run. It affects what is considered 'legitimate', 'radical' or 'unacceptable' and the types of information citizens consider. For example, a state's ideological standpoint on whether unlimited growth is desirable (or even possible) for industrialised economies has a major influence on the kinds of policies within state-sanctioned deliberation available to address climate and related crises. This is illustrated in Box 1 (page 16) focusing on the CCC and its engagement (or lack thereof) with the subject of degrowth.

“A spectre is haunting our society: the spectre of degrowth”, degrowth scholars Liegey et al. wrote in response to how the term (*décroissance*) was recurrently used “with fear and loathing” in the public debate surrounding the CCC report’s publication³⁵. In his address to the CCC members, on June 29th 2021 at the Elysee Palace³⁶, President Macron praised their supposed willingness to “turn their back on degrowth”, stating: “I believe, like you, that this would not be an answer to the challenge we face. [...] If we produce less, work less, we will no longer be able to finance the social model that we have. [...] A model of degrowth is also a model of degrowth of our social model”. Instead, he argued for “individual responsibility”, “change of behaviours” and “consumer choices”, as well as for technological progress as “the prime pillar that reconciles economy and ecology, which you are endorsing and in which I believe”. He concluded: “I believe in the growth of our economy, I believe in a model that innovates”.

Despite the fact that the Convention’s process was shaped by citizens much more than any other climate citizens’ assemblies, the process still did not allow, for example, discussion about the political economy and critical societal indicators such as GDP in connection with alternative models of development, oil and gas subsidies, the financial system, or the leverage that banks or pensions schemes have in the climate and ecological crisis. Nevertheless, at weekend 1 of the Convention Citoyenne (in October 2019) all 25 tables (150 citizens) spontaneously brought up the issue of using GDP as a metric. This was the key message coming from the 25 tables: “The obsession with growth, GDP indicators and the logic of profits is a blocker to the transition. The logic of financial interest takes precedence over the common interest”³⁷. This was identified at the very start of the process when exploring levers and blockers of change and was done before the citizens had heard any evidence from experts on the climate and ecological crisis.

Emmanuel Macron, in his speech on June 29th 2021, provided an unequivocal response to the Convention’s recommendations. However, because the Convention’s process was never designed to support meaningful deliberation on transformative economics, Emmanuel Macron’s interpretation of the citizens’ deliberation was done within the confines of a particular political agenda, excluding the earlier concerns of citizens.³⁸

Box 1: The degrowth discursive context of the Convention Citoyenne Climat³⁹

This example shows that political institutions have substantial invisible power to influence the ways in which citizens’ assemblies are constituted, how they operate and how they are perceived.

In their commitment to largely unquestioned ideals of neutrality and impartiality, the vast majority of climate citizens' assemblies have declined to build links to social movements, NGOs or other citizen groups in society. They have also reinforced a technocratic-managerial and depoliticized approach to climate policies – in effect undermining the possibility of systemic transformation⁴⁰. The main mechanism used to create a connection with social movements has been the inclusion of representatives from groups such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) in the governance structures of these assemblies (e.g. stewardship committees or oversight / advisory panels), with mixed results. Examples of assemblies that tried this include the Climate Assembly in the London Borough of Southwark⁴¹ and Scotland's Climate Assembly. In this latter case, representatives from XR Scotland were invited to join the stewarding committee of the Scottish Climate Citizens' Assembly⁴². However, just before the start of the Assembly, in November 2020, the XR representatives decided to leave the committee, arguing that the governance of the Assembly, its design and delivery model⁴³ had in-built biases which were preventing the process from addressing the systemic roots of the climate crisis.

Citizens' assemblies informed by and connected with NGOs, social movements and other civil society actors have the potential to visualise and normalise citizen participation as a way to navigate systemic transformations. If supported by non-state actors with the capacity to amplify and/or enact recommendations, such citizens' assemblies could also avoid being entirely dependent on the 'filter' of governments. Rather than view the involvement of social movements as biased and unwelcome, authors such as Donatella della Porta⁴⁴ have explored in detail the potential for social movements to progress democratic innovations. Most recently, the book "Reclaiming Participatory Governance: Social Movements and the Reinvention of Democratic Innovation", edited by Sonia Bussu and Adrian Bua, offers empirical and theoretical perspectives on how the relationship between social movements and state institutions is emerging and developing through new modes of participatory governance⁴⁵.

At the nation-state level, the norm to date has been for a citizens' assembly to have a mandate from a politician or a political body. This figurehead or institution prompts a question for discussion and then decides how to respond to the citizens' recommendations. That is, most citizens' assemblies are top-down, initiated by governments or legislatures. The Global Assembly by contrast used a different model: it was a bottom-up initiative conceived in collaboration with social movements⁴⁶ and supported by various actors from civil society⁴⁷.

In relation to this alternative method for accomplishing deliberation, and as outlined by Claire Mellier and Rich Wilson in an article for Carnegie Europe⁴⁸, "global governance is not like local or national governance: there is no one in charge". In this contested territory, the Global Assembly was considered to be "a hastily erected tent that every citizen on earth was invited to enter". Initiated from within civil society in this way, the assembly was nevertheless able to connect to formal UN COP governance arrangements with the guidance of representatives from the UN Secretariat, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the UK and Scottish governments as the hosts of COP26, and the COP Champions Network.

UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres endorsed the initiative⁴⁹, saying: “The Global Citizens’ Assembly for COP26 is a practical way of showing how we can accelerate action through solidarity and people power. You are helping to send the message loud and clear: people everywhere want bold, ambitious climate action, and now is the moment for national leaders to stand and deliver.” This endorsement came alongside those of others, such as COP26 President Alok Sharma⁵⁰, COP26 High-Level Champion for Climate Action Nigel Topping⁵¹, First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon, climate justice activist Vanessa Nakate and a host of others who supported the attempt to create a citizen-led governance chamber connected to institutions, civil society and grassroots communities.

At the same time, the evaluation of the Global Assembly highlighted concerns about the inclusivity of the process in terms of the dominant use of English as a language and its limited capacity to foreground the perspectives of more disadvantaged participants. The evaluation also questioned the Global Assembly’s focus on a discourse of ecological modernisation and mainstream sustainability (i.e. approaching problems with recourse to technological solutions and regulatory instruments), as well as the need to move beyond high-level formal bodies such as COP towards greater engagement with grassroots civil society⁵².

3. What next for citizens' assemblies and systemic transformation?

Can climate CAs, either as they are currently designed or by a more innovative process, really challenge the very regime by which they have been instituted? Can they install a new political object that is capable of critiquing the dominant framing of the problem of climate change and able to question the prevailing growth-based, inequitable and capitalist economic and social model?

If citizens' assemblies are intended to open possibilities for systemic transformations, the insights and examples above show that there is a need to learn from past experiences where this has either been able to take place to some degree, or where this has not been possible. In the next section, we make recommendations for citizens' assembly design, followed by specific recommendations for policymakers and other civil society actors. The briefing concludes with a strategic common goal that we propose deliberative democracy practitioners consider in relation to enabling and navigating systemic transformations in relation to the polycrisis.

The recommendations put forward require more testing and scrutiny, and there also remain some obstacles and unresolved questions as to how to address systemic transformations in the context of the polycrisis. As part of this, it is important for both researchers and practitioners of citizens' assemblies to collaborate and be open to experimentation as much as possible, giving ourselves the licence to fail and learn from mistakes.

We offer these recommendations with the caveat that deliberative democracy's potential to navigate complex trade-offs amid polycrisis cannot be realised through citizens' assemblies alone. For citizens' assemblies to improve the way in which the polycrisis is addressed, design must at a minimum consider how the assembly's process and recommendations integrate with the pre-existing political context, including political institutions, public debate and civil society⁵³. Even then, without upgrading surrounding democratic structures too, even the most transformative assemblies will struggle to meaningfully impact society.

A great many more societal interventions that build deliberative capacity outside of CAs are needed, in a range of settings. For example, deliberative systems theorists⁵⁴ suggest understanding deliberation as a communicative activity that occurs in a diversity of spaces and which emphasises the need for interconnection between these spaces⁵⁵, ranging from social movements, the media, educational settings and others. In practice, each space will be imperfect and vulnerable to co-option, distortion or marginalisation on its own. But as the routes to deliberative democracy increase in prevalence, they have the potential to collectively build the critical thinking, systems thinking and citizenship skills required to orient societal progress in a context of wide-ranging global uncertainties, increasing environmental change and continuing influence from vested interests.

3.1 General recommendations

3.1.1 Design processes with a systems change lens from the outset

A current concern is that deliberative democratic theory, as well as practical interventions including citizens' assemblies, tend to address parts of the system, or isolated dynamics, without a sufficient grasp of the broader whole. Systems thinkers and traditional and indigenous wisdom keepers urge that we approach complex problems in a more holistic way rather than linear, mechanistic terms. We recommend that a system change framework is used from the outset when designing deliberative processes that aim at addressing the root causes of the polycrisis. As well as our reflections and recommendations here, many other resources are available online⁵⁶.

Tools of 'systemic design' offer a way for deliberative processes to be crafted and run so that they are more attentive to complex, interacting dynamics. Systemic design has a large toolkit of methods⁵⁷. We recommend including the following elements as part of a system change deliberative process:

- an introduction to critical and systems thinking as part of a learning phase of a deliberative mini-public, in order to orient public participants to this way of understanding and approaching problems
- a session that articulates the political economy of climate change (i.e. the different actors and structures in society that maintain the status quo or propel processes of change), and which looks at alternative economic models
- an introduction to the climate and ecological crisis that acknowledges different world views and ways of conceptualising problems, incorporating perspectives from the global south
- the use of the "power cube" or other power analysis tools to explore power dynamics in society

In the case of Scotland's climate assembly, elements of a systemic approach were incorporated into its design and framing by developing four overarching scenarios of the future depicting different routes that could be taken to achieve net zero and showing how change can happen at different levels and paces. The scenarios used were described as Techno optimism, Climate mobilisation, Community collaboration and Civic provision and regulation. According to the evaluation of the assembly⁵⁸, there were differences in views expressed by the assembly members about the extent to which the process dealt effectively with the systemic nature of climate change and how members were supported in grasping its complex interconnections. In addition, only half of the recommendations that arose from the process involved, or had the potential to bring about, transformational change, with the remainder focused only on incremental moves away from the status quo.

3.1.2 Focus on controversies rather than consensus building

Citizens' assemblies typically seek consensus on policy recommendations in a forum that is expected to be representative of the wider population. But political disagreement is inevitable in society, especially on issues that involve complex trade-offs, and can alternatively be seen as an important way through which a range of alternative futures can be articulated and negotiated⁵⁹.

Likewise, broad acceptance of the framing and evidence presented to assembly members has hitherto been seen as crucial for the resulting recommendations to be seen as legitimate and therefore politically powerful. However, given the polarised and often fraught debate surrounding the topic of social transformation, bringing these disagreements into assembly processes is crucial to planning a shared path forward. Doing so also helps to broaden awareness of obstacles to action on socio-ecological issues.

Deliberative processes should therefore be designed to detect, communicate and explore (rather than ignore) the main points of disagreement over systemic social and environmental issues and potential futures.

This could be achieved by acknowledging that there is no neutrality in any process and that this notion is actually damaging to the credibility of deliberative approaches. Instead, we suggest the use of the concept of integrity, which acknowledges that there are inevitably embedded values in any process. The Deliberative Integrity project⁶⁰ provides a range of resources on the topic, which are invaluable to practitioners and academics alike. In Box 2 (page 22), we explore the handling of controversies in the Convention Citoyenne Climat (CCC) from this perspective.

After choosing assembly members by sortition (i.e. civic lottery), the second task of the CCC's Governance Committee was to organise the work of the Convention to meet its mandate. The committee recognised the double risk that:

- the CCC's scope could easily become limited and technocratic in light of the background learning materials being mainly produced by a government ministry, and a framing question oriented around the government's 2030 emissions reduction target
- it may be difficult for assembly members to identify blockages to public action on climate without further support

To navigate these risks, the Governance Committee began to work on identifying the barriers and levers of change for climate action in each of the five areas defined for the work of the Convention (Consuming, Producing and Working, Moving, Housing and Food). Later, it also began drafting "controversy sheets" as background material for assembly members.

However, the decision to do this work only came partway into the process after issues and concerns were raised by some committee members. As a result, it was decided that there was insufficient time to complete it for use in the CCC process.

Had the organising committee been grounded in a culture of controversies from the start, rather than attempting to transition from the culture of consensus and compromise on which most of the materials and processes were based, assembly members may have had a better capacity to prioritise the issues on which to work and to choose the experts to be heard in a contradictory debate.

Box 2: Case study: Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat's (CCC) handling of controversies⁶¹

3.1.3 Allow citizens more freedom to set the agenda and shape the process

Two newly formed permanent climate citizens' assemblies in Brussels⁶² and Milan⁶³ have agenda-setting power. However, evaluations of these processes are not available at the time of writing⁶⁴.

For most climate and ecological CAs so far, their agenda and process have been predetermined, as in the case of the CAUK example given above: framed around how a policy strategy should be reached, not whether it is appropriate and which alternative aims and approaches could be used.⁶⁵

France's CCC was shaped by citizens more than most climate citizens' assemblies to date, asking how France can "reach **at least** 40% reduction of GHG emissions by 2030 in the spirit of social justice". But the process still did not allow assembly members to talk about critical elements of the political economy such as an unquestioned reliance on GDP or alternative models of development.

Social psychology literature on 'scaffolding'⁶⁶ shows how the right support is critical for people to fully understand a situation and confidently respond to it. In the case of climate assemblies, we are currently seeing incremental proposals arise out of a situation that has already been defined as an 'emergency' (though often without much sign that the climate and ecological crisis is really being presented in this way). As such, we suggest there needs to be a greater willingness to create conditions that support ambition.

We encourage a wider range of experimentation to allow citizens more agency in shaping the agenda of CAs, starting first with presenting fundamental building blocks necessary to understand systemic transformations. This means not only scaffolding critical thinking skills, as used in many processes such as North of Tyne Climate CA⁶⁷ and Climate Assembly UK⁶⁸, but also time allocated to understand and explore how multiple social, natural and technological systems relate to each other and the dynamics of power and societal change. Given the uncertainties in how these crises will unfold, we also believe that assembly members should have access to a more expansive range of projections and scenarios with their accompanying consequences for people's lives – for example, worst-case scenarios that imply global catastrophe, mass extinction and large-scale loss of human life^{69 70}. However, to date assembly members have rarely been exposed to such lines of evidence.

In the spirit of experimentation, we would like to see commissioning bodies design citizens' assemblies with two clear stages. The first stage would lay the necessary groundwork for assembly members to make a broad assessment of what should be on the agenda to address environmental and related social crises, and therefore what expertise is required. In this stage, key controversies and uncertainties can be deliberated. A second stage can then facilitate assembly members to discuss this agenda and make decisions.

3.1.4 Facilitate emotional engagement with crises

Traditional perspectives on deliberative democracy argue that mini-publics should involve the exchange of rational arguments⁷¹ and avoid emotional engagement. Recent research developments⁷² are demonstrating that other forms of communication, such as non-verbal expressions and considerations of people's feelings and reactions, are important.

The potential suffering associated with the impacts of environmental crises is immense, as is the likely scale of change to daily life required to avoid the worst impacts. Emotional engagement with, and support to, meaningfully and constructively engage with these potentially traumatic realities is therefore crucial. This is not intended to be a form of group therapy, but rather a precondition to avoid typical responses such as downplaying the scale and urgency of crises (flight) or becoming part of a highly polarised debate (fight). It is in our view also a more human and compassionate way of engaging with the issues at hand.

Scotland's Climate Assembly did attempt to foster emotional engagement on climate change⁷³, with assembly members shown a video presentation on climate anxiety. However, there was no direct attempt to encourage assembly members to discuss their feelings about climate change or the evidence presented to them during the course of the process.

The Global Assembly also aimed at supporting a deeper level of emotional engagement during deliberations, both in the core process and separate grassroots community assemblies⁷⁴. The emphasis in the community assemblies was on sharing stories, experiences and feelings. This focus was articulated in a global assembly toolkit⁷⁵: 'Expressing Hopes and Fears'. A number of community assemblies engaged in this activity, sometimes deepening it with their own additions and interpretations. However, more research and evaluation are needed to assess the impact of these techniques on the participants and their responses to the polycrisis.

Recent research⁷⁶ shows that unrealistic optimism and wishful thinking are forms of defence against facing difficult truths and are considered maladaptive if maintained over the longer term because they serve to absolve the person from having to take radical action.

Designers of deliberative processes looking to foster communication at a deeper level, with the aim of exploring governing sentiments (e.g hopes and fears) rather than just values and beliefs, could take inspiration from approaches such as Theory U⁷⁷ and Pocket Project⁷⁸ as examples of healthy emotional processing supporting healthy democracy.

3.1.5 Invest substantial effort into engaging the broader public

It is particularly crucial that the wider public is as involved as possible in any citizens' assembly with ambitions to allow systemic discussion of climate and related crises. This can be achieved in two main ways, the first of which is public engagement via structured outreach that makes use of resources mirroring those used in the core citizens' assembly process.

In our view, this is a crucial first step for enabling decisions to be seen by the public as legitimate, and therefore harder for decisionmakers to ignore. Without strong public awareness, decisionmakers are under little pressure to implement any assembly's recommendations.

As an absolute minimum, therefore, assemblies need to develop robust communication strategies informed by clear theories of change and able to reach across demographics.

It is also important that assembly members themselves are closely involved in as much outreach and engagement via the media as possible. Based on our experiences from the CCC, CAUK and GA, it is the unfiltered sharing of their experiences directly with the public that most effectively generates connection with and support for assemblies. The Global Assembly for instance, produced eight films⁷⁹ on the lives of eight of the assembly members and their experiences of the Global Assembly, although, as described in more detail in Box 3, (page 26) the communication of those stories presented various challenges.

Communicating the stories before the process has fully unfolded is challenging⁸⁰. To allow the core assembly members to be as free as possible from external influence, their identities were not published until they presented their Declaration at COP26. This created a challenge for the Communications team: until Assembly Members were able to tell their stories, and communicate the impact of the Global Assembly on them personally, there was limited content with which to inspire wider participation and interest.

In addition, we learned that more creativity is needed to engage people outside of the deliberative community. In 2021, engagement around the GA came mainly from those already working in the deliberative field. This is understandable, given that a sufficient budget was not available to invest in a broad public engagement campaign, but meant it was limited in its reach and scope. Furthermore, the main 'call to action' for the public was to run community assemblies, an activity that may not have been easily approachable for those unfamiliar with deliberative or community dialogues.

In the future, there is an important role for communicators to play in bringing to life the often academic language around deliberative democracy. Anecdotally, the narrative strand that has resonated most with non-specialist audiences is that the climate and ecological crisis (and indeed many other crises) is a symptom of a governance crisis, and that there is a better way of finding solutions which centres on citizens. This narrative is a shift away from the often-heard stories from the front line of climate change, which focus on practical ways communities can act (such as tree-planting schemes) and the need for existing power-holders to listen to citizens.

Instead, the narrative communicates the bigger picture needed to reboot socio-political systems and put citizens at the heart of decision-making. Since the Global Assembly 2021 took place, this idea has grown, with the IPCC being more explicit about the role of citizens in governance around climate⁸¹. Hopefully, this can be explored more fully through future citizens' assemblies, generating powerful content from participants that can inspire more citizens to realise their self and collective efficacy in driving change.

Box 3: Case study of the Global Assembly: Finding the stories that resonate

Ideally, in addition to media engagement and outreach in which the public plays a more passive or receptive role, climate assemblies should also offer ways for the wider public to participate in parallel deliberative processes. In this way, climate assemblies can serve as the focal point of a broader societal conversation to push beyond discursive and political deadlocks⁸².

Scotland's Climate Assembly, for example, promoted parallel deliberations in the country's Children's Parliament and schools. The Global Assembly took this a step further by inviting civil society to participate in 'community assemblies' that take place in schools, community groups and other organisations.

At the heart of the challenge for scaling up deliberation is the trade-off between quality and quantity. The strict standards used to ensure high-quality and legitimate formal deliberation are cost-prohibitive to implement in wider participation processes and less accessible to people with limited free time. This does, however, limit the degree to which parallel deliberation processes can contribute to the central assembly's outputs. This posed problems for the GA, as the main criticism of community-based processes was that people didn't feel that their participation would lead to anything.

Based on these learnings, we suggest that practitioners have two functions in mind when creating wider deliberation processes. First, they should allow time for discussion of the systemic issues at play that the central assembly is considering. In so doing, public participants may have greater appreciation of the challenges the assembly members are facing and potentially greater respect for the eventual recommendations. Second, they should also allow time for deliberation on whichever issues can be influenced at a local level, and create space to arrive at recommendations that can be input into the local political context.

Particularly ambitious assembly processes may attempt to collate distributed deliberations⁸³ for consideration by a central assembly, but we appreciate that this may be beyond the reach of most practitioners.

3.1.6 Embed reflective evaluation that supports iterative and ongoing joint learning

Typically researchers evaluate citizens' assemblies after they have been completed. There is also usually no framework in place for a continuous feedback loop between designers, evaluators and assembly members.

We encourage process designers and researchers to engage in a more self-reflective practice that places integrity⁸⁴, rather than neutrality, at the heart of their work. Especially in the context of the need to experiment boldly given the urgency of the planetary predicament and the complexities of the problems faced, we believe processes would benefit from embracing action learning models of evaluation, as has been developed by the Research Institute for Sustainability (RIFS)⁸⁵ in Germany. For example, for the second citizens' assembly at the federal level on the role Germany should play in the world, RIFS researchers conducted scientific monitoring as a formative evaluation. This approach enabled results and findings from the research to be continuously incorporated into the planning and implementation phases of the process at predetermined points in time. In this way, the initiators and implementers of the Citizens' Assembly had the opportunity to make adjustments on the basis of external observations and scientific reflections⁸⁶.

In parallel with setting up formative (continuous) or summative (at the end of the process) evaluations of a citizens' assembly, a group of participants from past processes could comprise a legitimate body to oversee the integrity of future deliberative processes. Most have indeed been inspired and transformed by their experiences, while also having developed an awareness of the shortcomings of such approaches, and are often enthusiastic about using their new insights and sense of agency to advance the deliberative cause in some way. Inviting them into globally networked national associations of their peers and aligning them with diverse organisations of deliberative professionals would provide a potent oversight body which has 'street credibility' with their peers in ongoing processes, as well as with the public. The more power that mini-publics acquire, the more they are at risk of manipulation, co-optation or marginalisation. Citizen deliberators alumni could effectively help to identify and counter that danger⁸⁷.

3.1.7 Go beyond inclusion

The use of random selection and facilitated deliberation is assumed to generate high levels of equity and inclusion. Certainly, the participants in climate assemblies (and other deliberative mini-publics) are more diverse than most other political institutions. However, there are limits to this approach and the assumptions on which it is based⁸⁸. A Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) seminar on inclusion and disadvantage in climate citizens' assemblies explored the following two questions: Do elements of climate assembly practice lead to disadvantages for particular social groups? Do we need to look more closely at the design and practice of climate assemblies through the lens of equity and inclusion?

We argue that there is a need to redress power imbalances towards disadvantaged groups. This is something John Boswell, in his paper *Seeing Like a Citizen*⁹⁰ describes in great depth by highlighting the discrepancies between formal and informal inclusion, and the implications for deliberative practice. In particular, this insight calls attention to the need not to *treat* everyone equally if we want them to *participate* equally.

Other academics have challenged the assumption that a climate CA is fully representative in any case. As described by Amanda Machin⁹¹, “The fact that it is to some extent descriptively representative (it ‘mirrors’ the population in its composition of individuals in terms of features such as gender, ethnicity, and age) does not mean it is necessarily substantively representative (reflecting the various substantive interests of the population)”. She proceeds by arguing that “organisers of a CA cannot know for sure whether all political positions on climate have been included”.

Moreover, the decision and rationales about which particular descriptive features⁹² are to be mirrored are not clear. There are individuals whose opinions and experiences might be highly pertinent but whose voices are not included such as children, future generations, distant others and even nonhuman nature⁹³, although several citizens assemblies have recently included specific deliberative processes for children, such as in the Scottish Climate Assembly⁹⁴ and the recent Irish Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss⁹⁵.

3.2. Top-down citizens' assemblies commissioned by power-holders

Top-down citizens' assemblies committed to opening space for discussing and enabling system change need to embed a greater recognition of politics, power and a willingness to let go of control.

Research⁹⁶ about members of the UK parliament suggests that most politicians are conscious of the need for transformative action on the climate crisis, but feel that their ability to address it is limited by party politics and short-term election cycles. The consistent decline in trust in traditional politics⁹⁷ also indicates that the public recognises the limits and capacities of present decision-making processes to deal with this century's complex, interconnected and globalised issues.

We encourage policymakers to be open about these political quandaries and explicitly advocate for citizens' assemblies as a way to make progress on issues that traditional politics has avoided for a long time, but will inevitably have to face. In so doing, they have the opportunity to simultaneously break discursive deadlocks and start to restore trust⁹⁸.

If such commitments are made, resulting citizens' assemblies need to be accompanied by stronger measures to counter the post-assembly 'filter' of governments than previously seen. Some people advocate for binding recommendations⁹⁹ or connections with referendums¹⁰⁰.

An alternative option to binding recommendations might be a mandate for — or pledge by — politicians or civil servants to publicly respond (e.g., on their official websites and in news conferences) to every recommendation, committing either to adopt them or giving substantive reasons why they decline to do so. Such commitments can be built into the convening documents of CAs as well as forming part of a platform for candidates for public office¹⁰¹. In this vein, there are prototypes of candidates who pledge to follow citizen guidance in the US¹⁰² and the UK¹⁰³. These have not to date been grounded in deliberative approaches, but they do provide a template that could assist the integration of citizens' wishes into political processes.

3.3. Bottom-up citizens' assemblies outside of the policy process: redirecting power

3.3.1 Reclaiming participatory governance

It is often assumed that a citizens' assembly with a strong mandate from a public institution, with clear rules around the implementation of the assembly's recommendations, will lead to new approaches for tackling the climate and ecological crisis. However, our experiences of the CCC and the CAUK in particular suggest that this is an overly simplistic – perhaps even naive – theory of societal change. Indeed, the technocratic-managerial approach in these assemblies can just as easily be argued to have undermined or obstructed systemic transformation¹⁰⁴.

Although citizens' assemblies that are purposefully set up outside of the policymaking process lack the connections to visible power that can directly influence decision-making, they have substantial potential to open up more discussion of far-reaching and systemic changes than more constrained, top-down processes. By bringing together diverse social movements and citizen groups to deliberate on a shared goal, new ideas can be generated and collective action can be taken towards making these a reality¹⁰⁵.

Such assemblies can also help people envision and support new governance models which, in turn, have the potential to force undemocratic decision-making processes to change or become irrelevant. Dissatisfaction with the fundamental political decision-making process is now rife in many countries, but awareness of alternatives such as deliberative democracy remains low.

Democratic innovations (i.e. participatory or deliberative processes) have been hailed as an antidote to the elected representatives' plummeting legitimacy. However, Sonia Bussu et al¹⁰⁶. argue that these typically top-down invited spaces are giving too much power to the commissioning bodies and assembly conveners, who design the process, framings, options available and evidence provision, and choose who to invite, meaning that these “sanitised” processes of participation end up depoliticizing citizen engagement. In work carried out by the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations, the present authors together with colleagues came to similar conclusions and concerns about the extent to which this influence is exerted¹⁰⁷. Bussu et al. argue that ‘bottom-up’ forms of collaboration and social innovation led by social movements and grassroots politics attempt to institutionalise more prefigurative politics with an emphasis on social justice and the political economy.

More recently, we've seen the rise of advocacy from different movements reclaiming the space of democratic innovations. These include the initiative “Earth for All”¹⁰⁸ calling for deliberative processes on economic system change. In 2021, Earth4All and its partners published a major survey¹⁰⁹ of the 20 largest economies that showed that three in four people (74%) across the G20 support reform of economic systems away from a singular focus on profit and growth towards a focus more on human wellbeing and the planet.

This survey indicates that the socio-political window may be opening up for conversations about post-growth or wellbeing economies. This is echoed by the recent call for citizens' engagement on degrowth at the Beyond Growth Conference¹¹⁰ which took place in Brussels in May 2023.

3.3.2 Exploring the potential for citizens' assemblies to build collective efficacy

In light of the difficulties that policy-making processes have had addressing the systemic aspects of environmental and social crises, we are particularly keen to emphasise the potential for citizens' assemblies to instead build the self-efficacy and collective efficacy of people to make change happen themselves.

If supported by non-state actors with sufficient resources, such citizens' assemblies could go beyond making recommendations, towards supporting people to enact the result of deliberations while bypassing the 'filter' of governments entirely, in line with the principle highlighted by Buckminster Fuller¹¹¹, architect, systems theorist, writer, designer, inventor, philosopher and futurist: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete".

This kind of model could, for example, be applied to discussing what transformative changes can be made in local contexts without government approval or to enacting transformative changes in particular sectors of the economy.

This is particularly well illustrated by the newly formed Convention of the Future Armenian (CFA)¹¹², a civil society-led, deliberative initiative involving a large affiliation network of organisations in Armenia and the diaspora¹¹³. The establishment of this affiliation network facilitates the implementation of the CFA's proposals, which might involve direct funding of the proposals or taking them forward themselves if they are within a network member's area of responsibility or capability.

3.4. A common strategic goal: Permanent citizens' chambers as preparation for system change 'moments'

The vast majority of citizens' assemblies to date have been one-off processes, often in response to particular events that have brought long-running issues to the political foreground. While these have had some impact on policy, we believe that more permanent deliberative architecture is needed for citizens' assemblies to truly navigate the systemic transformations required by the polycrisis.

This is because systemic transformations nearly always happen in a non-continuous fashion¹¹⁴. Typically, social systems change little for long periods, until particular events highlight their vulnerability and inadequacy to provide a safe, fair and sustainable society. If the right conditions are in place at the time of an event, much larger changes are much more likely to be accomplished.

The timescale on which one-off or reactive citizens' assemblies can operate is far too slow to catalyse action from these system change 'moments', not least because political and civic attention is transient, and because power holders with interests in maintaining the present system are able to reconsolidate power through media and political influence far quicker.

The Covid-19 pandemic¹¹⁵ is a perfect example of this. Lacking alternative political infrastructure to catalyse learnings into action revealed that systemic vulnerabilities – such as a just-in-time economy that prioritises efficiency over well-being – have not been addressed. This is despite popular polling in several countries¹¹⁶, including the UK¹¹⁷, indicating that a majority of people want the economy to prioritise well-being over profit.

Regardless of the level of political action forthcoming, the coming years are likely to bring a number of these system change 'moments' to the fore, in the face of climate and ecological breakdown¹¹⁸. For instance, as explained by Olivia Lazard¹¹⁹, a fellow at Carnegie Europe and an expert in the geopolitics of climate, Europe is experiencing the results of growing water scarcity and droughts are becoming geological. In a country like France, this is no longer just limited to trade passages as a result of rivers drying up or shrinking agricultural outputs. It is also causing increased political polarisation and civic violence¹²⁰. In response to droughts, the French government decided to build water catchment infrastructures specifically designed to bring additional support to agricultural producers. But the water catchment structures, called *bassines*, have become the physical embodiments of divisions between those who favour risk mitigation strategies in the face of climate change, aiming to continue agricultural business as usual, and those who favour systemic change, supporting more environmentally friendly and localised agriculture. This highly polarised situation is the illustration of the mismanagement of the commons¹²¹, which is likely to become more generalised as the polycrisis unfolds¹²².

Each of these system change moments will provoke deeper reflection on the social systems that have increased their likelihood, frequency, and severity – and so far proven inadequate to respond to them. We believe permanent citizens' chambers are needed, so that societies can embrace deliberation and catalyse its transformative potential into courageous adaptation action as further challenges emerge¹²³. In that regard, rich countries from the Global North that have been spared from the most intense impacts of the climate and ecological crisis so far, need to learn from countries on the front line in the Global South, where communities that are struck by disasters have learned to navigate their situation to obtain the resources for survival and reconstruction, and to find a voice in a confusing political landscape¹²⁴.

The systemic challenges brought about by the polycrisis require ambitious and profound governance reform. Permanent assemblies are just one element of the governance system that needs creating, alongside more deliberative capacity-building across society. Awareness of deliberative democracy is still low in most countries around the world, and one of the most important first steps is to raise people's understanding of, and interest in, alternative models of decision-making, which place more power in the hands of ordinary people. We believe that at a time of rising mistrust, populism and polarisation, such cultural awareness-raising work is particularly timely.

With such efforts, we hope that the popular desire for citizen participation to be a more enduring part of society will build. We encourage actors from across civil society who are interested in or are already advocating for deliberative democracy to consider collaborating strategically on how to work towards permanent chambers.

It is crucial that this is done as a part of a wide-ranging reform of democratic systems. Too narrow a focus could result in providing legitimacy for democratic systems that need fundamental reform. The move towards institutionalisation of permanent citizens' assemblies is a case in point: should we institutionalise creative inclusive deliberative systems, or be satisfied with narrowly defined and occasional adjuncts to existing governance chambers?

We encourage challenges to our thinking and proposals, in the spirit of deliberation we are seeking to advocate.

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