

Citizens' Assembly – Key Statements

1. We are in a climate and ecological emergency situation that requires quick and substantial changes in all domains of policy. Scientists across the board highlight that massive changes to the workings of our social and economic system are necessary in order to protect citizens' lives in the Netherlands and globally!

2. The parliamentary democracy of the Netherlands is extremely unlikely to resolve the rapid and far-reaching policies that are indispensable to limit global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius and preserve the life-supporting ecosystems we rely on.

A: History shows that, despite better knowledge, the Dutch government has failed to tackle climate change: Since the 1990s, it has failed to reduce its CO₂ emissions. It has the third-highest CO₂ emissions in Europe and doubles the world average. It has the second-lowest renewable energy share in Europe. In contrast, however, it subsidizes the fossil fuel industry with on average €7.6 billion per year. Last but not least, it refuses to comply with the Dutch Courts' 2015 and 2018 Urgenda rulings to reduce CO₂ emissions by 25% by 2020 (in one year!). The responsibility to protect citizens' lives from ecological collapse can no longer be left solely to the hands of a government who has been failing to do so for 30 years!

B: Corporate interests play heavily into political decision making on the climate crisis on both national and EU level. The seemingly inclusive polder model of the Netherlands that is meant to allow for broad citizen participation favours economic issue-framings and empowers industries rather than civil society. The government allowed Shell a seat at the table of the klimaattafels although it has been shown that for decades the company actively misled society on the existence of climate change and stalled policy-responses to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the US and the EU.

C: The electoral representative system of the Netherlands is inclusive for some and inaccessible for many. Especially the interests of people with lower educational background are poorly represented in parliament. New (populist) parties respond to the need for more inclusivity by advocating crude democratic innovations such as referenda. These (flawed) proposed solutions find support in broad parts of society. Many decisions in the Netherlands are made in informal consultations (polder-model) that disadvantage people with lower educational background who are underrepresented in these fora.

D: Parliamentary representatives in the Netherlands find themselves in a 5-year electoral cycle, after which they want to be re-elected. This prevents them from making the rapid and substantial, yet potentially unpopular, decisions that are indispensable to tackle this climate and ecological crisis, and protect citizens in the long-term.

3. A Citizens' Assembly (CA) is better-suited to live up to the challenge of implementing rapid and substantial policy changes, because it is more independent and inclusive. CAs have proven to produce high-quality decisions in situations of civic controversy. Moreover, CAs are set up to take into account the needs of all citizens in the Netherlands. A CA is thus ideally positioned to take the lead on the climate and ecological emergency while upholding justice and fairness.

CAs are institutions in which randomly selected citizens deliberate on public policy or law. The participants of a CA are chosen via *sortition*. Sortition is a process of randomly selecting citizens from the population. To ensure that the composition of the CA (age, gender, income, location of habitat, etc.) mirrors that of the entire population, sortition relies on demographic quotas (stratified sampling). The underlying idea is that deliberation within the CA should approximate what deliberation would look like among the entire population of a country. This is why CAs have also been called 'mini-publics'. CAs are instruments of *deliberative*

democracy, which emphasizes face-to-face debate and consensus finding. CAs have been used successfully in countries such as Australia, Canada, Iceland, India, Ireland, Poland, the UK in order to find solutions to problems of long-standing controversy. CAs have proven to foster cohesion and public participation in situations of societal polarisation and democratic fatigue. Beyond that, they are ideal tools to find socially just solutions to problems that require unprecedented pathways and potentially difficult trade-offs. Importantly, CAs are also good tools to take decision-making processes out of the realm of corporate/interest-group lobbying and to avoid that political power games compromise the democratic solution-finding process. CAs are thus ideally positioned to find the far-reaching and transformative policies needed to tackle our current climate and ecological crisis.

4. Arguments for CAs on climate and ecological justice

A: The climate crisis creates and will continue to create pressures on society. Changes in the environment like droughts, storms, and floods, will lead to crop-failures, losses of livelihoods, migration, and poverty. The rapid transition we need and demand to prevent climate breakdown will in itself create extreme pressures on social systems. Industries and associated jobs will change or disappear. Investments in infrastructure and fossil-fuel industries will lose their value. Active measures must be taken to enhance social cohesion and prevent further polarisation and inequality. Participatory, inclusive, and transparent decision making can lead to more just decisions that gain support by large parts of society and consider the voices of otherwise underrepresented groups in society (lower education, migrants, youth).

B: CAs, if properly organised, can protect decision making from excessive interference by organised (economic) interest groups. However, interest groups and the government can exert influence. Such interference can happen in three phases: definition of the mandate; facilitation of the processes including selection of consulted experts; further use of the outcome produced by the CA.

C: CAs are mini-publics that represent a cross-section of the population, rather than a political elite. This predisposes them to make decisions that take into account the needs of all. CAs are therefore well-positioned to ensure that the rapid- and far-reaching transformations needed to tackle this climate and ecological crisis happen in a fair and socially just manner.

D: CA participants do not strive for re-election. This makes them independent from political power games and political career considerations. It empowers them to make the rapid- and far-reaching, yet potentially unpopular, decisions that tackling this climate and ecological crisis undoubtedly requires.

5. Responses to counter arguments:

But CAs do not have a legitimate democratic mandate! Parliamentary democracy stipulates that elected representatives (known and accountable to the people) resolve policies and laws, not randomly selected citizens!

This is not true! CAs *do* have a legitimate democratic mandate. It's just that their mandate does not rely on elections, but on sortition. If constituted according to sortition, CAs form ideal bodies of democratic representation, because an assembly of randomly-selected citizen represents the population better than representatives elected by a fraction of society. This is how democracy worked in ancient Greece (at the time excluding women and slaves). Moreover, it is normal for democratic representatives to delegate part of their decision-making to specific decision-making bodies (such as a CA). Finally, CAs are not supposed to completely replace representative democracy but to aid it. In the age of internet, democratic innovations are possible! We therefore need to think less in terms of oppositions (i.e. representative vs. deliberative democracy) and more in terms of combinations.

But it's too expensive. It will cost the taxpayer!

We are in an all-time-exceptional climate and ecological crisis that might expose us to severe hunger and health damages, and even cost our (or our children's) lives. No means should be too expensive to tackle this crisis. Compared to the damages this climate and ecological crisis will soon cause us (and *already* causes us), this measure is cheap. In 2008, for example, the Dutch government bailed out Fortis (ABN Amro) with more than 16 billion euros (Steen 2008) and injected more than 10 billion euros into the bank ING Group (Jolly 2008) in response to the 2008 financial crisis. Compared to this, the cost of a CA is peanuts.

But what if the CA participants do not recognize this crisis as a crisis, or come up with bad/insufficient policies?

We need to trust the democratic process. So far, CAs have come up with good solutions. Moreover, of course, we need to invest in a good quality CA. We need to face the fact that parliamentary representatives have failed to tackle this crisis for 30 years. It's time for a change in democratic approach, even if this change may seem daring or unfamiliar.

For good reasons, the Netherlands just banned binding referenda, and now you come along and want to revive direct democracy?

It is true, Referenda and Citizen Assemblies are similar in the way that they let normal citizens make potentially far-reaching decisions. But this is also where the similarities end. Citizen Assemblies do not involve people in isolation but instead put the process of information gathering (consultation of experts and stakeholders) and subsequent deliberation at the center. What is more, Citizen Assemblies do not ask simple yes/no questions but instead require people to frame problems themselves and come up with the solutions that are necessary to face it.

But don't opinion polls give politicians enough insight into what the population wants and needs?

Opinion polls capture ad hoc reactions, rather than informed opinions. Because they lack elements of public learning and deliberation, they are low-quality means to grasp a population's average long-term interest. While it is true that opinion polls (if well done) are a good measure to capture a cross-section of the population's will at a given moment in time, these polls have a major weakness: they capture the will of citizens that neither had the opportunity to inform themselves beforehand about a specific matter of concern, nor had the opportunity to deliberate about this matter with co-affected fellow citizens.