FAQs about Citizen's Assemblies (CAs)

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What is a Citizen's Assembly (CA)?

Citizens' Assemblies are institutions in which randomly selected citizens deliberate on public policy or law. (Pal 2012) They can be considered as instruments of deliberative democracy – a form of democracy that relies less on votes and instead emphasizes the processes of face-to-face debate and consensus finding. There are different formats of CAs. The format that XR prefers includes the following elements (according to XR UK):

1. 'Citizens: Citizens are at the heart of deliberative democracy. A citizens' assembly must reflect the body of people who will be affected by its outcomes, in this case the NL population. Members are selected randomly, through a process known as sortition.

2. Coordinating Group: A citizens' assembly is run by a team of coordinators whose impartiality is essential. Their independence from those funding the process is safeguarded by a series of checks and balances, such as the oversight panel. These coordinators are responsible for conducting the process of random selection and inviting experts, stakeholders and facilitators. This role is normally taken by a professional organisation or a group of such organisations.

3. Advisory Board: The advisory board develops key criteria for the selection of the expert/stakeholder panel. It also ensures, with the help of the oversight panel, that the background material and evidence presented to a citizens' assembly is balanced. The advisory board may be composed in different ways, for example, in the Irish Citizens' Assembly the board comprised academics and practitioners across a number of specific fields of interest.

4. Expert/Stakeholder Panel: These are a mixture of experts, stakeholders and rights-holders who brief the assembly on their perspective. They are invited by

5. the coordinating group based on criteria set by the advisory board to ensure fair and broad representation of opinion.

5. Facilitation Team: A team of facilitators is appointed by the coordinators. In every session during the citizens' assembly a facilitator sits at each table with assembly members. The role of the facilitation team is to ensure that the deliberation is not dominated by a vocal few and that everyone has a chance to speak. This role should be carried out by experienced practitioners who are impartial.

6. Oversight Panel: The oversight panel can be made up of citizens, representatives of government, rights-holders (representatives of those whose rights are under threat, such as grassroots campaigns), technical experts in deliberative processes and other stakeholders such as NGOs and corporations. The role of this body is to monitor the whole process ensuring its compliance with standards.' (XR UK 2019)

(*Note*: This info is taken from the *Extinction Rebellion Guide to Citizens' Assemblies*, which provides more detailed info and is available [here](#))

How are the members of a CA selected?

The members of a CA are chosen at random to approximate what deliberation would look like among the entire population (e.g. 50 % women, 50% men). To that end, the process of *sortition* is used. Sortition uses demographic quotas to ensure that it the composition of the CA is inclusive in terms of a range of factors such as gender, age, ethno-cultural heritage, education level, sexual orientation, disability and geography. One can choose to amplify the voice of historically underrepresented people by allocating more seats in the CA to certain groups of people. Typically, the members of a CA are selected by taking a random sample of eligible inhabitants or citizens of a given jurisdiction. In some cases, however, it makes sense to ensure the proportional representation of certain groups of society (e.g. certain minority groups or people living in rural areas).

How does sortition work?

A good method of sortition is *stratified random sampling*. Stratified random sampling means that 'the public is divided into subpopulations based on, for example, gender, age, ethnicity, education level and geography. The percentage of assembly seats reserved for a subgroup reflects the percentage of that subpopulation. Individuals are then drawn at random from within these subpopulations. Populations tend to have 50% women and 50% men; hence, stratified sampling means that with an assembly of 100 members, 50 seats would be reserved for women and 50 seats for men. This is a simplification by means of example and we recommend that non-binary individuals should be included in gender quotas. Unlike jury service, citizens who receive an invitation can choose whether or not they attend. Though some identities can be fluid, the idea behind stratified random sampling is that the general public should be able to

identify one or more assembly members who are like them – i.e. that they are the same age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, identify as the same gender or that they live in the same region in a rural or urban setting. Based on this, citizens can infer that if they had the same access to experts, stakeholders and rights-holders and time to deliberate, then they would make similar decisions. This is not meant to implythat identity markers have a direct impact on the way that people take decisions, but that stratified random sampling allows for more diverse voices in the decision-making process. It is important for the legitimacy of a citizens' assembly that the general public have faith in this approach, from selection to deliberation, and can see that their perspectives are being represented. It takes approximately six weeks to carry out the sortition process (including stratification) and create a body of representative, randomly selected citizens ready to make decisions in a way that is legitimate, fair and inclusive.' (XR UK 2019)

How are CAs established and how do they operate?

A strictly non-partisan organizer must be appointed to establish and organize a CA. The actual work of CAs is structured into the following 4 phases: listening, learning, deliberating and deciding. The listening & learning phases are meant to train non-experts in critical thinking and inform non-experts on the facts. The consultation phase is about hearing experts and interested parties regarding their views on the issue at hand. The deliberation phase is about evaluating all information gathered, narrowing down options, and making decisions (often according to values that were previously determined by the CA members). During all phases, it is important to stimulate reasoned debate and ensure that all CA members have equal opportunity to participate. Once the CA has drafted and voted on its recommendation, there are several options for implementation available (see *Is the CA's decision binding?*).

These are the 5 major steps:

1. A non-partisan CA organizer identifies the population to be represented in the CA. The organizer uses sortition to randomly select CA members from the population. Sortition must ensure that the population is adequately represented (age, gender etc.). Selected CA members receive a letter and decide on their participation (yes/no).
2. CA members gather and receive a training on critical thinking. They can also co-establish key values according to which they make their decisions to come.
3. CA members receive information from stakeholders and rightholders in the issue debated (such NGOs, relevant organizations, the government, XR, companies, etc.). The process of information should be open to the public (e.g. via live-stream). It is recommendable to also give the public the opportunity to intervene (e.g. by writing to the assembly their hopes, dreams, fears, etc.)
4. CA members deliberate in facilitated groups of 6-8 people. The format of this deliberation is a roundtable, with a trained facilitator. It is important to avoid that any CA member dominates the conversation. Moreover, it is paramount that CA members face each other during this phase of deliberation. The

deliberation in groups is not public. This is because CA members might feel inhibited to speak openly if they know that the public is following their contributions. It also protects individual CA members.

5. Deliberation groups come together to narrow down options and co-draft a set of policy recommendations. They then vote on those recommendations and write a report on their deliberation process. Facilitators can support this process.

For a more detailed step-by-step model, please see *Extinction Rebellion Guide to Citizens' Assemblies.*

Are the decisions of a CA binding?

This depends on situation and national law. In the UK, for example, there would have to be legal (constitutional?) changes established before a CA decision could be completely binding. This is unlikely. Yet, it is possible to negotiate with government different options:

- *Option 1* (preferred option?): The CA drafts a policy recommendation. If a CA majority of 80+ % votes for this recommendation, government must implement the recommendation. If a CA majority of 50-80% votes for this recommendation, government can implement or reject the recommendation. In case of a rejection, it would have to justify itself for not implementing the recommendation.
- *Option 2* (a variation of option 1): Variations of option 1 are possible. For example, it possible to also give government the opportunity to reject a recommendation that was voted for with an 80+ majority. Conditions would need be set then (e.g. government must publicly justify itself, make a counter-proposal, etc. – within a certain time-frame)
- *Option 3* (not recommended?): The CA drafts a policy recommendation and votes on it. The recommendation is then passed on to the electorate for a referendum. The electorate can decide between the status quo and the recommendation.

[Note: We need to figure out our preferred option and what the legal situation is in NL]

What speaks for CAs in general?

CAs are used to expand citizen participation and to enhance public reason-giving and accountability for political decision-making (Pal 2012). Often, CAs are called into action in order to pioneer new solutions to long-standing problems, as well as to take specific issues out of the realm of interest-based political bargaining (Pal 2012). The issues on which CAs deliberate tend to be complex matters of long-standing political debate and disagreement. The underlying idea is that randomly chosen citizens can look at the evidence more objectively, without money, ideology or political power games interfering in any systemic way. In particular, CAs are used to tackle issues that are 'too

hot to handle' for politicians because they 'fear repercussions from the electorate' (Hallam 2019, 53). After an intensive training and learning process, CA members are often in a better position to decide on an issue than politicians, whose decisions tend to be influenced by lobbyism and career/re-election considerations. CAs are also used in times of democratic deficit, which is characterized by declining trust in political institutions, decreased voter turnout and general political disengagement (Pal 2012), and they work against situations where governing is perceived to happen predominantly from the center (Pal 2012).

In summary, *CAs promise to deliver the following advantages*:
- *Reason-based rather than interest-based decision-making*: political parties are voted to represent certain interests. CAs are meant to represent the interests of the entire population. This puts them into a good position of making decisions about an issue with population-wide repercussions (such as climate and ecological crisis).
- *Daring solutions that political representatives would not dare*: At times, politicians fear to resolve necessary policies because they fear not to be re-elected or provoke backlash among the population. A CA is in a better position to resolve daring policies because they do not have to worry about being re-elected. Because CA decisions are made from the people for the people, their policies are not the policies of an elite governing top-down. A daring decision resolved by a CA is therefore likely to provoke less backlash among the population.
- *Informing and involving the wider public*: If communicated well (advertising, live-streaming), CAs carry large potential in informing the wider public about an issue of population-wide concern (such as climate and ecological crisis). Measures of public participation (e.g. inviting the public to write to the CA before deliberation) moreover carry the potential to enhance public participation.
- *Looking at a problem with fresh eyes*: Within a CA, non-experts become experts during the learning/information phase. They then look at a problem with fresh eyes, which allows them to venture innovative solutions.
- *Making value-based rather than technocratic solutions*. CAs are particularly well-suited to decide on issues with a strong moral component (such as ensuring a good future for our children/future generations) and/or issues that affect all citizens (such as climate and ecological crisis). The premise of a CA is that expert citizens decide *on behalf of* all citizens, rather than experts deciding *for* other citizens.

What speaks AGAINST CAs in general:

CAs have been criticized for:
- *Not having the necessary mandate in order to make politically binding decisions*: Parliamentary/representative democracy stipulates that *elected* representatives, which are known and accountable to the people, should resolve issues of

disagreement. Climate decisions have not been adopted in Irerland, see 6.30 in https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LFTyKcbVpyU

Potential counter-arguments:

1) 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.

2) It is normal within representative democracies to delegate decision-making processes from elected representatives to specific decision-making bodies (such as a CA).

3) The fact that CAs decide by strong majority or even consensus-based, gives their decisions a much better democratic legitimacy than the simple majority resolved by political representatives.

4) In the age of internet, democratic innovations are possible! We need to think less in terms of oppositions: It is not representative democracy vs. direct democracy, but there are other/in-between forms required to deal with the challenges of our time.

- *Transferring public deliberation into 'safe havens'*. Rather than decentring public deliberation to engage the public more broadly, a relatively small amount of citizens engages with a topic of public concern. It is therefore questionable if CAs really make political deliberation more 'public' than parliamentary democracy does.

  Potential counter-argument: Step 3 in the operation of a CA (CA members receive information from stakeholders and rightholders) carries great potential in enhancing public participation. Of course, it depends on how the process is communicated and facilitated if this potential is realized.

- <mark>To be continued (we need to be more prepared for counter-arguments)</mark>

- binding decisions require constitutional change (too time-consuming)

Why is XR demanding a Citizens Assembly? Why should a CA deal with the climate and eco-crisis?

"Extinction Rebellion believes that a citizens' assembly would help resolve problems in our current parliamentary democracy that have led to inaction on the climate and ecological emergency:

- Successive NL governments have failed to respond to the growing crisis of climate change since the issue first became a matter of public concern over 30 years ago.

- The five-year electoral cycle discourages governments from attending to long-term issues like climate breakdown.

- Democratic representatives are lobbied by powerful corporations, seek sympathetic media coverage and calculate their policies based on potential media and public reactions, as measured by opinion polls. This means politicians often feel unable to propose the bold changes necessary to address the

emergency." (XR UK 2019) (--- an indicator of this in the Netherlands is that many politicians work for big multinationals after their political careers)

- Elected politicians rely on opinion polls in order to ensure that their measures mirror public will. Opinion polls usually just capture uninformed, unconsidered reactions (before people had a chance to learn about the topic and consult fellow citizens on their situation/opinion).
- Political parties are elected by a partial voter base, which expects them to give precedence to their interests. This makes specific parties/coalitions unfit to make adequate decisions that concern the entirety of a population (including minorities).

"Here is how a citizens' assembly on climate and ecological justice will break political deadlock:

- A citizens' assembly on climate and ecological justice gives politicians access to public judgements that have been reached in a fair and informed way. This will help politicians commit to a transformative programme of action justified by the mandate they receive from the citizens' assembly, reducing the potential public backlash at the ballot-box.
- Citizens' assemblies are fair and transparent. Assembly members have an equal chance of being heard due to careful facilitation. All of the information and materials given to the assembly members is shared publicly. This produces informed and democratically legitimate judgements.
- Citizens' assemblies can be used when difficult trade-offs are necessary. For example, experts might propose policies on how to meet a 2025 target for net-zero greenhouse gas emissions and the assembly would then decide which one they prefer such as mitigating the effects of any changes in economic policies for those in society on low incomes." (XR UK 2019)
- Sortition ensures that every spectrum of society feels represented. The advantage of this is that people are not told by elites that they need to make unpopular sacrifices (such as flying less) – but instead by their peers. This is easier to accept (Gillet Jaune example).

Which reasons could speak *against* having a CA deal with this crisis?
The CA is not elected by the public and its decisions therefore do not have a mandate by the electorate.
This may not be a problem if the electorate largely agrees with the CA's decisions. However, given that the CA's decisions to tackle the ongoing the climate and ecological emergency may stipulate major societal restructurings and require sacrifices from the population, it may be that the electorate protests against the CA. Its legitimacy may be called into question.
A potential counter-arguments could be:
1) Democratic legitimacy does not necessarily have to stem from elections. In a representative democracy, a legislative body is considered 'legitimate' if it is

representative. Sortition ensures that a population is optimally represented. The reason why CAs may be perceived as illegitimate is not that they are but that the public is used to parliamentary democracy, wherein representation is legitimized via elections.
2) Beyond that, CAs can be empowered by means of delegation. The parliament delegates the task of tackling the climate/eco-crisis to a CA. Delegation is a normal process within parliamentary democracies. A prime minister is also not directly voted in the Netherlands but his/her party, which then delegates power to the PM.
3) It is not necessarily the case that unpopular decisions made by a CA will receive public backlash. Unpopular decisions made by a parliament tend to be perceived as elitist top-down decisions (as was the case with the fuel tax/Jillet Jaune in France). CAs, in contrast, have a much better chance to push through unpopular decisions than a parliament does, because CA members represent the wider public, rather than a political elite. CAs also do not have to worry about keeping voters on board.

A Citizen Assembly would take too much time to make suitable legislations for the emergency. (Citizen Assemblies are inefficient).
Counter arguments: [...]

What can we learn from past experiences with CAs (risks & best practices)?
Risks:
- Past experience shows that CAs were not sufficiently insulated from political interference during the constitution, the deliberation and the referendum stage (Pal 2012). Both political actors and actors representing societal institutions (such as companies) tried to influence the CAs decision making process to their own preferred ends.
- Past experience also shows that CAs are taken less seriously when being a one-off event.

Best practices:
- Past experience shows that CAs are more successful if deliberation topics are specific.
- Past experience shows that it supports the work of CA assemblies if there is public awareness of the assembly before, during and after.

Where and when have CAs been used so far?
Ireland
- The CA was established by the parliament in 2017 with 99 citizens.
- It debated 5 issues (including gay marriage, abortion and climate change) over a period of 1.5 years
- Example of success: The CA on climate change decided by 80 percent to tax carbon-intensive activities. This proves the CA's capacity to make value-based decisions, because it shows that people are willing to impose sacrifices on themselves to achieve a broader value and ethical goal. The CA also decided on

the Health Act 2018, which gives pregnant women the right to abort until week 12 of their pregnancy under medical supervision. This proves the CA's capacity to make decisions in issues of moral complexity and long-standing political confrontation.

The Netherlands
The Gemeente Uden also held a CA (G1000) in 2014. It was composed of 250 self-selected members who discussed what they wanted their city to achieve in the next 40 years. For more information, please see: https://www.uden.nl/inwoners/meedenken-en-meedoen/udenaar-de-toekomst/g1000/

Further examples
The XR UK Citizen Assembly Handbook provides a range of further examples: https://rebellion.earth/wp/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Extinction-Rebellion-Guide-to-Citizens-Assemblies-Version-1.1-25-June-2019.pdf

Are CAs the same as people's assemblies?
No, the main differences are that CA's are formal and time-intensive processes of decision-making within a political community (city or nation state). Sortition is used to select CA members, so that these members adequately represent the overall population. In contrast, "people's assemblies are organised discussion forums open to anyone who would like to attend. They aim to be structured processes of dialogue that allow a large number of people to generate ideas, deliberate and make decisions. People's assemblies usually last between one and four hours and can take place anywhere — for example in occupied spaces such as roads and city squares. Under a variety of names, people's assemblies have often been used in many grassroots-led movements, ranging from the Chartists, Suffragettes, the US Civil Rights Movement and more recently Occupy, the Arab Spring and the Gilets Jaunes. People's assemblies were used throughout XR's April Rebellion to discuss a wide range of issues – from innovations in democracy to practical decisions about how to clear up and end the April Rebellion" (XR UK 2019). There is an XR people's assemblies manual available: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1xlsDyH2BBqJt2QnIsU-hajSTyX7JxZRm/view

How can XR promote CAs?
A working group (UK): 8pm via Zoom, inform about CAs (public), lobby for CAs (government), encourage people to spread the word, idea of having CA ambassadors among government, give MPs 3demands bill and get them to sign it.

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Participedia – good source to research deliberative methods

Journal of public Deliberation https://www.publicdeliberation.net/jpd/