

Climate Citizens' Assemblies Spring to Life in Europe

Article by Maria Dios

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In a world grappling with the climate crisis, social unrest, and polarisation undermining democracy, an oasis of ideas for a better future has bloomed. It happened in Milan during the Spring School on Climate Citizens' Assemblies. The two-day event brought to the same room the instigators of the next wave of participatory democracy that looms on the horizon. Uncover their stories, insights, and dreams for a greener tomorrow for Europe.

Europe was thirsty after a severe drought and warm winter when spring came. It brought no rain. But it did carry an event nearly as necessary as water for the old continent: the Spring School on Climate Citizens' Assemblies. On the curriculum, how to facilitate a future co-created by everyday people and move away from the technocratic and top-down approach to the ecological transition that has too often led to backlash across the European Union. In the two-day workshop, which took place from 27 to 28 April 2023 in Milan, over 70 people from diverse backgrounds and corners of the world gathered to share lessons learnt in the deliberative field, showing a way out to the union's new trilemma: climate action, social justice, and democracy.

There is little doubt that we are living in a time of crisis. Extreme weather events, energy supply shortages, an ever-increasing cost of living and also polarisation, populism and mistrust in democratic institutions. Quoting David Van Reybrouck, "There is something strange going on with democracy. Everyone seems to want it, but no one believes in it any longer." These elements lead many to anxiously question whether limiting global warming to 1.5 degrees is still a credible pathway. The first to wonder during the Spring School organised by the Federation for Innovation in Democracy – Europe (FIDE) and the Knowledge Network On Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) was Graham Smith, who chairs the latter. "It is not a great context for a significant transition," were words from his opening speech. But here, Graham assured, is precisely where climate citizens' assemblies come in. Optimism had taken over the room by the time all participants took their seats for the welcoming session. The mood lasted until the end of the school, yet today remains a catalyst for the next wave of climate assemblies on the European horizon.

Climate citizens' assemblies are an exciting development in climate governance. Still rather new. By definition, they are a tool to bring together everyday people, selected by sortition, to learn and deliberate. Citizens don't merely discuss or debate; they strive to devise a solution collectively rather than trying to win over each other. Two fundamental elements for achieving this are lots of time and balanced information. Thousands of citizens hours later, the outcome is concrete recommendations to guide climate policymaking. Because of its capacity to break political deadlocks, boost the willingness of political leaders to act on climate and, above all, legitimise tough decisions that need to be taken on the ecological transition, climate citizens' assemblies are becoming increasingly popular worldwide. So much so that the [OECD](#) talks about a "deliberative wave" in recent years. Over the last three, close to a hundred climate assemblies have been carried out in Europe.

Ireland's Citizens' Assembly was the early bird, working on climate-related issues at the end of 2017. But

the French Citizen's Convention on Climate was the one that marked a turning point in 2019. Since then, many climate citizens' assemblies have followed across the continent at regional and national levels. Some are on their way to becoming institutionalised, such as the [Brussels Citizens' Assembly on Climate](#). What that first wave of climate assemblies had in common is that each was adapted to a specific context. There is no unique formula for running these processes. That is why practitioners, policymakers, civil servants, researchers, students and activists interested in engaging citizens in climate policy in their home countries enrolled in the first edition of the Spring School. "It is just very smart to learn from people that already did a climate citizens' assembly because it involves a lot of decision-making. Although they are very dependent on the context of each country, it truly helps to compare experiences and learn from other people," Linde van Noord, a participant from The Netherlands, summed up.

Linde travelled to Milan from Rotterdam, where she works for an organisation "lobbying" and "providing information" on deliberative democracy to the Dutch government. "I was studying a master's in economics but paused it because, most likely, there will be a national citizens' assembly on climate, and I am working for an organisation that wants to monitor the quality of the process." Until last September, Linde was part of Bureau Burgerberaad as a volunteer. After some local climate assemblies popped out across The Netherlands, her organisation started to operate business-like to push for more. "We were mostly inspired by the French example, the first big national climate assembly, although it didn't end as well as we thought it could. We also want to push for a national one because we have climate goals and laws but not enough plans to implement the changes."

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Water supply under threat, earthquakes caused by fracking and an nitrogen pollution from intense farming are some of the concerns Linde names when asked about the urgency to act on climate in The Netherlands. "Most of the resistance is coming from the farmers. They have been promised to make a lot of money with the current production system, which is not sustainable anymore," exemplified Linde as a backlash to the green transition. Shifting to climate-friendly societies requires profound economic and social transformations, heavily impacting citizens' lives. So climate citizens' assemblies are seen as a better way to improve acceptance of those decisions. "They are an excellent opportunity to include voices that are not heard. In The Netherlands, there is a strong tradition of negotiation. Still, it's always based on representation, and we see it's not as representative as we thought. Climate assemblies are a way to include a lot of voices directly."

A similar thought crossed Andriana Delegkou's mind when she applied for the Spring School, as climate assemblies have yet to arrive in her home country. Working for WWF Greece, Andriana wanted to grasp the essentials of deliberative democracy so they could set a precedent by running the first one. "We only got a climate law last year. There is work being done, but it's really immature," said Andriana, perplexed by the lack of real action from the Greek government and the "undermining of public participation". "This is a matter of life and death, especially in Greece, which is in the Mediterranean area and experiences extremely high temperatures. We can already see how wildfires are becoming intense. People on islands are facing floods. Even though we are a vulnerable country, action is very low."

Andriana arrived at the Spring School with a personal assignment of learning the basics. “Setting the question and choosing the citizens. How do you make a climate assembly diverse?” One of the core elements to ensure legitimacy is achieved is recruitment, the so-called democratic lottery. “If you select a limited group of people, you need a way of selecting those citizens that is fair and clear to everybody, that people accept as legitimate. The top thing is the sortition, the random element, but that is just a technical elaboration,” explained Yves Dejaeghere, executive director of FIDE, on the first day. Sortition goes in hand with stratification, so the group of participants randomly chosen is a broad representation of a population. Age, gender, geography, socio-economic status, and ethnical background can be taken for granted. But for controversial topics, such as the ecological transition can be, various attitudinal criteria towards the political issue are also brought in. Everyone has a seat in a citizens’ assembly, from activists to climate sceptics.

Nevertheless, as Andriana learnt, a common side effect of these participatory processes is that citizens become more active in environmental matters. “Some even became politicians,” Andriana recalled, surprised. And many vegans, as mentioned by some speakers on the stage. A participant from Poland, Agnieszka Pędzich, witnessed another empowering example during a climate assembly she was involved. “We had a teacher participant, and between one weekend and another, when we were in meetings, she told us that she spoke about it in class. She was discussing the topic with her pupils at the school. It was something so important.”

Agnieszka’s organisation, Field of Dialogue Foundation, has organised two climate assemblies in Poland. The Warsaw Climate Assembly, held online in 2020, and Cracow’s Sustainable Transport Citizens Assembly, which is now at its final stage. Despite the two experiences, Agnieszka joined the Spring School looking for guidelines on providing balanced information to the citizens. “How to give the participants evidence so the assembly is engaging and independent, allowing them to have a critical opinion,” she expressed.

The worry was somehow shared by a more seasoned practitioner, Marjan Ehsassi. She was one of four guarantors selected to the Collège des Garants of the French Citizens’ Convention on the End of Life and is on the Oversight Committee of G1000’s We Need To Talk Citizens’ Panel. As a participant, Marjan claimed to take away a valuable lesson from the Spring School on this matter. Or, at least, some collective thinking, if not an answer. “How do we ensure that we allow citizens the freedom to move in the directions they want to move? Can we create spaces for citizens before we go into the learning phase for them to really think outside the box? Participants asked me this in Paris and Brussels recently, so it’s something for us to think about.”

For this participant, bringing in the same room all people working -or willing to work- in the climate citizens’ assemblies field was a unique opportunity she had never encountered. “I spent about 15 years in international development working on governance issues, and in the past five years, I’ve switched my attention to more deliberation and Western democracies. And I’m now obsessed with citizens’ assemblies and how they can impact participants. There is a lot of deliberation happening around, especially in Europe. But there aren’t enough opportunities to learn from each other’s experiences. Schools like this, where we think about best practices, are valuable so we can learn from our mistakes. We’re always making mistakes.”

Most attendees arrived in Milan either with plans to organise their first climate citizens’ assembly or already having been part of one. The 65 registered people came from 21 different countries, mainly based in European territory. Still, a few flew from the United States and Australia, attracted by the European deliberative wave. Profiles ranged from highly experienced practitioners, such as Marjan, to

academics, activists and even people from children's education and the cultural sectors. Regarding levels of policymaking, the Spring School covered it all. Inside Fondazioni Feltrinelli's building, chosen venue by the organisers, one could see from mayors to European Commission representatives, such as Mateusz Tokarsi. Coming from the Joint Research Center (JRC), Mateusz wanted to "see what different initiatives are happening", realising how helpful it is for the institution "to use all the knowledge that is already there".

The JRC's policy analyst, whose main objective for the Spring School is networking, would be thrilled to see the climate assemblies taken to the next level. "Many of the environmental problems don't end at the national level. They have to be globally addressed. We have rivers that are very often borders between countries. What happens on the left or right side is closely connected, so it should be discussed together. Not necessarily a pan-European, but perhaps a cross-national assembly for biodiversity would be a great idea."

Bridges between countries set aside, Mateusz found in a collaboration between group ages a remarkably insightful lesson from the Spring School. A workshop about involving children and young people in a climate assembly. "It was quite shocking, but in a positive way, to discover how young kids were already part of a national one. So it was great to hear that you can do it, that it works and how it works in connection with the adult one." Many others agreed that the workshop offered by Katie Reid, a project lead for children's participation in Scotland's Climate Assembly, was the best in class.

Ultimately, the youngest generation undoubtedly has a moral entitlement regarding climate. As everyone had in mind the urgency to engage the younger ones in climate policy, it was not surprising seeing a group of participants gather around a board game. Energetic, a board game that challenges players to decarbonise New York City, made its way from the US to the backstage of the Spring School. Proudly and excited, Philip Lindsay walked the onlookers through the aim of a game. "The purpose is to create a collaborative experience that mimics what is necessary for a just energy transition. The point is to build 16 gigawatts, ideally by 2035. So there are some basic elements: the gigawatts, the public opinion, the years and the grid stability."

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Energetic, designed for 11 to 60 years old players, was created by City Atlas, a team at Hunter College in New York that Philip volunteers for. But democracy and citizens' assemblies are not just a game for him. Working for the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College, he travelled as part of a delegation from New York to Europe for inspiration. "To successfully connect the dots with decision-makers in the United States, we need to know which actors over here have the best understanding of these processes that can enable us to not to make the same mistakes they've made naturally by trying new things."

Homework in Eastern Europe

In the Spring School organised by FIDE and KNOCA in Milan, there were only five countries where climate citizens' assemblies have yet to be a reality. All from the Balkans. Greece, as mentioned earlier, together with Croatia, Romania, North Macedonia and Serbia. Attendees from this region shared with the rest of the class some obstacles they encounter when carrying out participatory processes, providing

experts in the field with food for thought.

Usually, the ambition for climate assemblies is to have them commissioned by governments. They aimed to be “part of the formal infrastructure of climate governance”, explained Graham Smith, who admitted being taken outside his comfort zone. The context of the Balkans offered some valuable lessons to the chair of KNOCA and professor at the Center for Study of Democracy at the University of Westminster. “Coming face to face with the challenges that some of my colleagues, particularly in Eastern Europe, are facing made me realise that maybe our work is too focused on climate assemblies as government commissioned. And actually, we need to be just as focused on how to make them independent sites of deliberations and recommendation-making.”

Graham found the challenges facing climate citizens’ assemblies in highly politically polarised regions, where distrust in governments runs deep, so stimulating that he thought about a second Spring School in Eastern Europe. “If we do it again, I’d be very excited about trying to go further into the East. They’re thinking about assemblies as institutions that can be run separately from governments. That can be a way of responding to democratic decline or climate scepticism.”

But for now, the professor gladly passes the whole class. “I can certainly say if the future of assemblies is in the hands of the participants, then I’m delighted. They are, without doubt, a group of the most committed, energetic and creative people I’ve met. And I’m really excited to see where they take practice because this is what we need,” Graham affirmed, looking at the seeds planted in the Spring School.



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