Global Citizens' Assembly on the climate and ecological emergency – COP26

By Claire Mellier-Wilson

The Global Citizens' Assembly (GCA) on the climate and ecological emergency was launched in December 2020 to coincide with the fifth anniversary of the Paris agreement.

What is the GCA on the climate and ecological emergency?

The GCA is a global scale deliberative process which will bring together everyday citizens from around the world to discuss the climate and ecological emergency in the run up to COP 26. This is not a one off process. It has been designed to become a permanent piece of global governance infrastructure. We are not starting from scratch as we are building on what's been done in previous COPs in Copenhagen in 2009 or in Paris in 2015, with processes such as World Wide Views. But this time we are aiming to reach a wider audience because we feel the scale of the climate and ecological emergency requires ambition. So this might sound unrealistic to some people, but we feel that's what what's needed and we hope we will achieve our ambition to scale up deliberation.

The aim of the Global Assembly is to bring together ordinary citizens from all around the world to make recommendations to COP26 on what priorities and tradeoffs for the future should be. These citizens will be a representative snapshot of the world population. They will be chosen by lottery, following the principles of sortition, not self-selection, and will be broken down by gender, age, economic background, geography. Random selection is quite a powerful argument because anyone on that basis could be selected. But in parallel to the Core Global Assembly, distributed events will be held in order to increase awareness and participation. We believe this is addressing a criticism of current deliberative processes, which are very meaningful and have a lot of depth in the deliberation phase, but fall short of scaling up the conversations to support wider participation and awareness. Here we are aiming to combine deep deliberation through the core assembly and wide participation via the distributed events.

Why a Global Citizens' Assembly?

There are five key reasons why we think we need a global citizens' assembly on the climate and ecological emergency:
- To address global challenges: our global governance arrangements have struggled to tackle global challenges like climate change, global finance, coronavirus, regulation of corporations or digital ethics.
- To improve global democracy: most people's voices have been absent from global governance. This means that when political and business leaders gather together to make key decisions at the WHO, Davos or UN Climate Conferences these decisions are made in a democratic vacuum. The vast majority of people have had no voice at all at the global level. The permanent members of the UN security council is a small club representing just five countries: China, France, Russia, the UK, and the USA. And even in these countries citizens very rarely vote for their elected members based on global issues, which means that our global institutions have less democratic legitimacy than they need. Add to this the increasing influence of global corporations on global governance and the limited influence

of many countries especially from across Africa, Latin America and Asia and the democratic deficit is obvious.

- To strengthen justice: most people and especially the world's poor have been absent from global decision-making. Much of our daily lives, from the quality of the water we drink, access to education and digital interactions are determined by organisations operating at the global level. It's vital that now we seek to bring these decisions back within the democratic system; most especially for the world's poorest. The point and morale authority of democracy is justice. The protests that have swept the world in 2019 and 2020 have been unified by their demands for improvements to democracy, be it students striking for climate justice or the Lebanese calling for fairer financial policies and reform of their political system.

- To overcome polarization: our systems of global governance have created division and stagnation. Voting systems which erode empathy; and consensus based decision-making which lack the ambition or pace to address the challenges we face. With the Global Assembly, we will bring together new voices many of whom will have a different analysis of the situation and what we should do. Not everyone will agree on what actions to take; but when we support careful listening between them new and unexpected ideas will emerge. Participants will be supported to share their deepest fears and hopes and stay true to their principles, which in our experience will generate deeper understanding between them. Understanding which is the catalyst for new possibilities to emerge.

- To truth: global governance has been defined by smoke and mirrors. Data on pandemics and climate change is hidden and politicians claim to know what the people think when they haven't even asked them. The Global Assembly would be defined by truth. Sharing with people the best evidence we have on the issues we face. Including the areas of contestation within the science that always exist. And citizens would be supported to interrogate and respond to that evidence to give their views on what should be done in response.

Why citizens' deliberation?

When policies affect people's lives and they are an active agent in the solution, they have the right to participate in the policy-making process. This is not just a moral argument but one of efficacy, for two reasons:

- citizens tend to come up with better policies than politicians because they are often closer to the issue and not constrained by having to 'play the political game', and
- in order to get citizens' cooperation and buy-in to difficult decisions it's vital they are engaged as equal partners in the policy process.

Our struggle is about the shift from top-down representation to participating together in partnership. The shift from parent-child to adult-adult. It is about acknowledging that if we want to protect and increase our freedoms whilst addressing the crisis we face requires citizens to acknowledge the leadership role they play; and to do this governments must treat people as equal partners in the change process. It is about the shift from passive democracies to active democracies.

There is a body of evidence that climate deliberation can lead to much more ambitious climate policies than what politicians come up with. You might have heard of the Irish Assembly, which
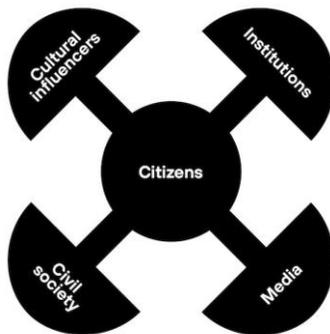
took place in November 2017. But more recently, in 2020, in [France and the UK](#) two of the most high profile climate citizens' assemblies were initiated. Laurence Tubiana, the architect of the Paris Agreement, was chair of the Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat. Obviously, she understands climate diplomacy very well and how hard it is to develop ambitious climate policies which have public buy in.

We are currently witnessing major tensions on how deliberative democracy outcomes dock into the existing representative democracy apparatus. In France, President Emmanuel Macron and his government have been accused of cherry picking some measures from the Convention Citoyenne and watering down the more ambitious ones. We are currently learning a lot from these processes.

How was the Global Assembly conceived?

The assembly has been co-designed with citizens, institutions, climate scientists, social movements and citizen participation practitioners. Throughout 2020 we have worked closely with grass-roots social movements to ensure that it is owned by and hard-wired into the real concerns of communities across the world. This has included around consultations with over 200 grassroots leaders, academics and creatives from the global south. The logo Akoma Ntoso is an ancient Ghanaian adinkra symbol, directly translated as "linked hearts". Akoma Ntoso symbolises the deep understanding, agreement and harmony possible when we communicate from the heart. It also represents unity, that all people are connected. It was chosen by citizens involved in the coproduction process which included Ghanaian citizens.

What will the Global Assembly consist of?

- **Citizens**

The Core Assembly will be digital by default, but distributed events will take place face-to-face based on organisers' discretion and local Covid-19 regulations and best practice.

Local contexts will determine what is possible in terms of the type of 'lottery' selection. In some cases, it will be done in person (door-to-door and on street recruitment) or over the phone (landline and mobile phone) using existing databases, but some places don't have post-code databases, let alone electoral registers, and mobile phone ownership is only 61% of the world population. We are also giving careful consideration to how we interpret the concept of "the citizen" in a global context. Indeed, the term "citizen" can be exclusionary if we draw a population sample from the

boundaries of the nation state. Our methodology is taking the principle of inclusion very seriously, and we will ensure specific groups such as stateless refugees, asylum seekers or migrant workers for instance are included in the sortition selection process.

Anyone will be able to run their own distributed local assembly processes. This would mirror the 'core assembly', using the same resources and process, but it will be self organised by local groups (e.g. community, organisation or school). There would be no expectation that these local events would follow strict citizens' assemblies rules such as stratified sampling of participants or professionally facilitated group deliberation etc. The purpose of the distributed events is to widen participation and allow anyone who wants to take part to be able to do so.

- **Cultural support**

Throughout 2020 we have been building a global network of cultural support. This is what raises assemblies profile, increases the participation rates and the impact of the recommendations. To give you a flavour of some of who we are working with:
  - The hip hop based Y'En A Marre movement in Senegal
  - A pan African network of over 100 musicians that include Baba Maal and Femi Kuti
  - Oscar winning director Asif Kapadia is already developing a documentary on the assembly
  - Mexican, African and South American 'indigenous wisdom keepers'
  - Warp Productions to engage cutting edge electronic artists
  - Massive Attack, Jeremy Deller, Brian Eno and Sir Mark Rylance

This network is a global bank of creative responses to the idea of a global assembly. This is not an exercise in celebrity endorsement, but an invitation for creatives to provide their own responses to the project through whatever medium they use.

- **Institutions**

To develop the Global Assembly, we have been working with the UN High Level Champions for COP26, COP 26 hosts (the UK and Scottish governments), the UNFCCC and the UNSG. We also hope to have an official relationship with the IPCC and many national governments as well as the numerous other institutions and businesses who have a stake in the climate and ecological emergency. Through the co-design process it has become clear that the citizens contributions will be relevant beyond the official COP26 negotiations; including to the G20 Summit hosted by Italy in 2021 and G7 Summit hosted by the UK and a wider set of global institutions such as the WHO, World Bank, IMF and WTO. We will support liaison between the GA and the various other relevant events and audiences.

- **Media**

We know that a key factor for whether citizens' assemblies achieve change (especially to policy) is the extent to which they generate wider public debate; and generate interest from large numbers of people in the process who are not directly involved in the process itself. We will therefore work with media organisations to raise the profile of the Global Assembly. We also hope that media organisations themselves will host distributed events across their organisations so their staff can personally engage in the global assembly and consider the roles their industry could take in addressing the climate emergency.

- **Civil society**

Most climate citizens' assemblies which have happened so far around the world such as in France, the UK, Ireland, have been initiated by governments or parliaments in a top down way, but the Global Assembly is very much a bottom up process. It has been initiated by civil society, climate and social movements both in the Global North and Global South. Civil society will have a key role to play in amplifying the distributed element of the Global Assembly.

10 principles underpinning the Global Assembly
We designed the Global Assembly based on our learning on climate deliberation over the past two decades in . We think there are 10 key principles which should underpin climate deliberation.

1. Make transformative or incremental change a conscious choice. Citizens need to be supported to understand the difference between transformative and incremental change and develop recommendations through that lens.
2. Be future-focused by sharing all possible scenarios. Citizens need access to data that provide the best possible guesses regarding the effects of climate change, but the data should be presented in a tangible way to illustrate the real consequences for people's lives locally, nationally, and globally. The scenarios should not be sugarcoated but rather include both the bleak and optimistic forecasts and the likelihood of each occurring.
3. Look at mitigation and adaptation as two sides of the same coin. Current Climate Citizens' Assemblies (CAs) tend to focus on climate change mitigation, but even if the Paris Agreement target is met, people's lives will still be impacted by issues stemming from climate change—such as sea-level rises and food and water security—matters that citizens will have important views on. Citizens should at least be given the choice to discuss adaptation.
4. Design a highly robust independent process. Mainstream climate politics are characterized by passion and polarization. Therefore, it is vital that the GA process and its governance are beyond reproach. Key decisions—such as on the agenda, the selection of experts, and who votes on what—need to have a robust and publicly defensible basis.
5. Maximize representation when possible. Citizens' Assemblies gain credibility when they can claim that the whole population is represented. And, of course, the greater number of people involved, the more representative the process will be—to give an analogy, the more pixels you have, the truer the picture will be. Size matters, especially when working on politically charged topics, because politics is a numbers game. Processes involving more people are more resilient to political scrutiny.
6. Create a national debate. Perhaps the most impressive statistics coming out of the Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat were that 70 percent of all French people surveyed had heard about the convention and that 62 percent were supportive of most measures. This not only generated a powerful mandate for change but also a movement of people who engaged with the convention via the media, discussed it with their friends and families, and are now putting pressure on their politicians to implement the recommendations. The Global Assembly should aim to generate a similar public debate at the global scale.
7. Create, and build awareness about, the Global Assembly with the involvement of civil society, citizens, government, businesses, and the media. Having all the involved actors set the framing question, agenda, and voting method is essential to ensure buy-in. Allowing citizens to influence the agenda fosters ownership and creativity, and involving the media is

necessary to create a global debate. Also, given the key role of businesses, it's important for them to be seen as partners in the process.

8. Foster emotionally intelligent participation. As already mentioned, many people find it hard to emotionally digest the possible traumatic impacts of climate change, leading them to either downplay their scale and urgency (known as flight) or become part of a highly polarized debate (known as fight). Most climate citizens' assemblies today do not provide emotional support and stick to what might be called type 1 communication (a simple exchange of opinions) or type 2 communication (a discussion of beliefs and values). Instead, citizens' assemblies should engage people in type 3 communication (a fostering of governing sentiment that addresses people's hopes and fears). This is not group therapy but rather, as described by Professor Otto Scharmer, a precondition to developing transformative responses with the critical benefit of dissolving group polarization.

9. Explore how change happens. Probably the biggest block to the impact of any citizens' assembly is "politics as usual." Even if an assembly has the support of decisionmakers (for example, members of the executive, such as Emmanuel Macron in France) as well as their commitment to not filter the recommendations, politics can get in the way, as already seen in France. AmericaSpeaks—which pioneered citizen summits and twenty-first-century town hall meetings (in many ways the predecessor to citizens' assemblies)—supports participants to understand the wider political environment of how change happens. Sometimes this approach results in citizens' acting as advocates for their processes, and sometimes it involves developing specific recommendations in light of the environment. Either way, it means that the processes are wise to the demands of realpolitik.

10. Generate hope by design. Although the vast majority of people now believe that climate change is an urgent challenge, there is still little hope that much can be done about it. Many people think that this lack of a positive narrative on tackling the crisis is perhaps the biggest barrier to creating political momentum for change. Therefore, the Global Assembly will seek to spark global public debates, and could become important creators of new hopeful narratives.