Walter Wittkamp, augustus 2024

In the Netherlands, there are more and more local citizens' assemblies on various topics. I was personally involved in citizens' assemblies on different subjects such as healthy aging, climate, equality of opportunity, waste, and mobility. Good processes are followed, and the citizens' assemblies are generally well received. With more experience, insights into the *do's and don'ts* also grow.

The Netherlands plans to start a National Climate Assembly later this year, asking for advice on consumption, travel, and food. Among Western countries, the Netherlands is one of the last to hold a climate assembly. This is unfortunate, but it does offer plenty of opportunities to learn from the mistakes and best practices of almost all EU countries: national climate assemblies have already taken place in England, Belgium, Scotland, Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Luxembourg, Austria, Germany, France, Ireland, and Spain.

With this article, I would like to share some insights for the Dutch National Climate Assembly. These insights come from various sources. For example, the report from the Centre for Climate Change and Social Transformations (CAST) with guidelines for meaningful climate assemblies. I also draw from the work of the Knowledge Network on Climate Assemblies (KNOCA) and the Odyssean Institute, particularly concerning the relationship between the climate crisis and other crises (polycrisis). Another source is the article by Julia Steinberger (University of Zurich) about the unwillingness and powerlessness of political democratic institutions to come up with meaningful policy interventions regarding the climate and ecological crisis. Finally, I use some older sources on citizens' assemblies (such as from the OECD) and my own experiences with citizens' assemblies and forms of direct democracy. Many of these insights are also applicable to other citizens' assemblies (so keep reading if you're particularly interested in those).

There are, of course, many more well-functioning forms of direct democracy, but I will leave those aside for now.

Introduction: Only an Integral and Systemic Approach is Meaningful
The root cause of the climate and ecological crisis lies in deeply embedded and interconnected economic, political, and social systems. Deeper social issues such as inequality, racism, colonialism, and polarization, as well as the foundations of current political and economic models, are intertwined with environmental degradation in an ongoing polycrisis. The climate and ecological crisis should be seen as part of this polycrisis, which includes other crises such as information disruption, a shift in world order, and a stagnating energy transition. The polycrisis also includes a crisis of governance.

Climate assemblies in European countries have so far struggled to address 'climate' as part of this polycrisis and in light of the systemic causes. This is one of the reasons why few recommendations from climate assemblies have led to real social, political, and economic transformations. This is particularly disheartening because, according to the UN and scientists, rapid social, political, and economic transformations are existentially important for life on Earth.

THE CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL CRISIS MUST BE SEEN AS PART OF THE POLYCRISIS, THAT ALSO INVOLVES A CRISIS OF GOVERNMENT

CAST concludes that this lack of focus stems from the fact that commissioners and policymakers steer deliberation in citizens' assemblies from a top-down model. In this model, existing systems and decision-making structures serve as the starting point. The commissioner is a ministry, the topic is limited, solutions are predetermined, or politicians want to influence the outcomes. A citizens' assembly that falls under a department often does not allow for changes in other departments, resulting in half-baked solutions. This leads to inadequate proposals, participation as a facade, frustration among participants, and a further decline in citizens' trust in governments and politics. Participants in national climate assemblies are generally aware of the need for far-reaching action and are disappointed when their proposals are frustrated by politics.

Therefore, it is much more effective to choose a bottom-up approach in citizens' assemblies. In this model, the problem analysis is entirely in the hands of the assembly, and instead of advising politicians, the assembly gives directives to the government. To make this possible, interventions are needed in four areas. First, there must be a clear answer to the questions of why a citizens' assembly and why on this topic? Then, there needs to be more focus on power structures in and around climate assemblies, so participants and the general public understand how challenging it is to develop effective and feasible policies for complex issues. Third, it must be clear that large challenges require large behavioral changes, for which societal interventions are necessary. The final guidelines concern the design of the climate assembly. It must be ensured that the climate assembly is well aware of the urgency and can bear the great responsibility of giving directives for economic, political, and social system change.

These recommendations apply to some extent to other citizens' assemblies, but they may be difficult to follow for smaller assemblies due to time and financial constraints.

Acknowledge: Why a Citizens' Assembly?
Compared to politics, a well-functioning citizens' assembly offers better solutions to complex problems. This is because it doesn't have to take into account an (angry) electorate or the media (electoral considerations), there is sufficient time and willingness to listen to each other and experts, and decision-making is based on consent (fewer compromises). There is also much less undesirable influence (corporate lobbying, consensus-building to avoid pain), and the experiences and knowledge of the entire society are utilized. The entire process is transparent and enhances public support. Citizens' assemblies are far more democratic than the political representative system because they allow many more people to participate in

decision-making and discussions about what is necessary and fair. Additionally, they strengthen citizenship by encouraging people to reflect on what is important for themselves and others, and they bring more morality into policymaking. Citizens' assemblies are also more democratic than voting once every few years for a party with a variety of positions you may not fully understand.

In the context of the polycrisis, politicians are more part of the problem than the solution. Unfortunately, since power lies legally and in practice with political parties, citizens' assemblies will only work if politicians relinquish their decision-making and legislative power and return it to the people. This is a significant demand for people who have acquired power within their party, often by promoting themselves as someone loyal to the party's ideology, which is used to dominate the electoral market. Even if that ideology is based on pure propaganda, lies, goes against scientific facts, or only benefits a small group of people. Therefore, it is the citizens, not politicians, who should make important decisions.

This is because the worldview of our national politicians is often far removed from scientific knowledge and is sometimes purely egocentric.

A citizens' assembly should also be asked to establish guiding principles as a basis for policymaking. The assembly should discuss topics such as economic growth, what it means and how it can be approached differently, the importance of health for people and nature versus pollution (including noise pollution), short-term versus long-term considerations, solidarity with people who struggle to keep up with society, the kind of future we want for coming generations, and whether we want to do business with countries that violate human rights or destroy nature.

Citizens' assemblies are a way to introduce morality and principles into governance.

What we want to hear from political commissioners when starting a citizens' assembly is an honest statement:

"We, as political parties, cannot come to adequate decisions among ourselves. The system makes it impossible to break away from established paths and vested interests of companies and parties. Because we know that a citizens' assembly can come up with much better policies, we will step aside and promise to carry out the assembly's directives through the government. We will do everything we can to ensure that the outcomes of the citizens' assembly lead to good, efficient, and widely supported directives."

It is also important to answer why a citizens' assembly is necessary for this particular topic. Before addressing that, it's essential to state that policymaking generally does not go well. National policy, in particular, often proves to be flawed. It may not be legally sound, is difficult to implement, often ineffective, sometimes counterproductive, or worse than the problem itself. It works only for a limited group, burdens local governments with problems, goes against the will of the people, offends other countries, or violates human rights. Of course, policy does often work well, but these examples may not make the news. Everything has become so intertwined that making good policy is too difficult to leave to politics alone. A better question might be: for which topics should we not have a citizens' assembly?

It is wise to use citizens' assemblies when a topic is complex. Complexity has three aspects. First: cause-and-effect relationships. The more interdependencies there are, the harder it becomes. A nuclear power plant is highly complex but can still be built with sufficient expertise. Second: the number of stakeholders. More stakeholders mean more interests, a higher chance of polarization, and more (invisible) lobbying. The third aspect of complexity is uncertainty. The more uncertainty there is about future developments, the more complex the issue becomes, and a citizens' assembly can make a better contribution. For example, we know that AI will play a bigger role in our lives, but how and what exactly remains uncertain. The same applies to the effects of biodiversity loss, the amount of microplastics in all living organisms, when the Atlantic current will stop, China's growing military role, and the U.S. elections. Addressing uncertainties, preparing for 'worst-case' scenarios, and applying the precautionary principle are tasks that a citizens' assembly should handle.

Let's ensure that the biggest and most certain threat—the ever-accelerating extinction wave caused by the polycrisis—becomes a meaningful topic for the **Dutch National Climate Assembly**.

Insight: Power Structures
The [CAST report](#) makes it clear that a climate assembly must first gain insight into the existing power structures. These are often structures we are so accustomed to that we no longer question them. We find it so normal for others to think and decide for us that we no longer listen critically or ask deeper questions. As a result, we tend to too easily adopt the analyses of politicians, trust their goodwill, or rely on their knowledge and skills. We are used to decisions being made about us, and we are not invited to participate in those decisions.

This would be against the interests of those who benefit from inequality, polarization, unsustainable economic models, and the governance crisis. This small group of egocentric beneficiaries has several easy tools at their disposal to stay in power. The most direct method is to influence politicians with money, fearmongering, and media power. Additionally, they use propaganda (advertisements, proxies, opinion pieces) to ensure society remains full of passive consumers. They fuel all kinds of addictions (gambling, tobacco, alcohol, sugar, junk consumption), make the population depressed, and overload the healthcare system. Whether they do this consciously or unconsciously—criminally, from a psychopathic condition, or with 'good' intentions—the result is clear: millions of people with severe obesity, dependent on antidepressants, addicted to gambling or drugs, in debt, and reliant on food banks in a country with features of a narco-state and a tax haven.

Incidentally, many powerholders are also victims of a system with negative incentives that they cannot fight, even if they have good intentions. Many people in power suffer under the current system because power causes stress, overwhelms every powerful person, and isolates them.

Only when citizens' assemblies learn how these power structures operate can they address the systemic and deep-rooted causes of today's problems. This learning process must use examples from previous climate assemblies where attempts at systemic changes were thwarted by industrialists, governments, and politicians.

CAST describes the often implicit power of commissioning bodies to shape the agenda, task definition, and course of citizens' assemblies in a way that limits the scope of analysis and solutions. This frustrates the effective tackling of complex problems (and leaves ample room to continue making the planet unlivable). Consider also the short-term pressures of election cycles, which, because the benefits may not materialize before the next election, ensure that truly transformative changes to social, political, and economic systems are resisted. Lastly, there is the entrenched bias within the government itself, with top officials clinging to outdated economic ideas, dutifully supporting the harmful political ideologies of their ministers, excelling in accounting tricks, believing they can continue business as usual, and refusing to accept that the times call for radical change.

At the very least, this requires an awareness among the members of a citizens' assembly of their right to understand the systemic causes of the climate and ecological crisis, to conduct their own problem analysis. Furthermore, strong capabilities are needed to challenge the 'rules of the game' that favor established interests. citizens' assemblies must avoid being co-opted by prevailing interests. This is difficult because we have become so accustomed to it that we unconsciously follow cultural and ideological boundaries, even when they obstruct real solutions. As a result, alternative perspectives and viewpoints are not only kept out of decision-making discussions but also out of awareness and consideration within the citizens' assembly. This applies to the commissioners and designers of citizens' assemblies as well.

A citizens' assembly should, at the outset, discuss how power structures shape beliefs, self-perception, and acceptance of the current situation—a situation that is leading us towards a terrifying future...

Established power structures too strongly influence how citizens' Assemblies are set up and conducted. They determine what is considered 'legitimate,' 'radical,' 'inclusive,' or 'unacceptable,' and what types of information citizens are allowed to consider. The citizens' assembly must be able to decide these things for itself, owning the process. Moreover, attention must also be paid to the power structures within the citizens' assembly itself.

One myth that fits into this is that citizens' assemblies must be given a limited and manageable task. This may apply to topics where politicians use citizens' assemblies as an excuse to avoid

making decisions themselves (such as fireworks or paid parking). But we need citizens' assemblies precisely when we know that the only meaningful approach is a transformational one.

Directives Instead of Recommendations
This also means that citizens' assemblies should be set up to give directives to governments, not recommendations, no matter how weighty those recommendations may be. With recommendations, you get a process of bargaining, discussions about opinions on feasibility and desirability, or other delaying tactics, giving established interests time to frustrate the outcomes of the citizens' assembly.

By giving a citizens' assembly the power to issue directives, all involved parties must ensure the process runs smoothly. After all, the directives from the citizens' assembly must be feasible and effective, but without imposing constraints in advance. We should fear soft solutions. Particularly regarding the current extinction wave, we know that it is better to endure some short-term pain now (which will mainly affect those who can bear it easily) than to continue muddling through and ruining life for everyone in the future.

Engagement: Societal Interventions
To return democracy to the citizens, various societal interventions are needed. First, deliberative capacities must be developed. This means learning to engage in dialogue, listen, and understand different opinions better. This forms the foundation for meaningful participation, improving collaboration and social cohesion. It strengthens community spirit and citizenship.

Enhancing deliberative ability is primarily a task for our already overstretched educational institutions. The good news is that they will benefit greatly and quickly, with improved school performance and experiences. Additionally, HR departments within organizations will play an important role in developing these skills in the workplace. There are many best practices, such as sociocracy and deep democracy. Tip: if an organization operates according to sociocratic principles, the SER (the Dutch Social Economic Council) can grant an exemption from forming a works council.

We must relearn how to think in terms of respect for different perspectives, including by recognizing that we all have or can acknowledge different polarities. This helps bring objections to the surface and include the wisdom of the minority in decision-making. We can learn to trust each other's good intentions a bit more and not dismiss one another too quickly but approach each other with compassion. Critical thinking, systems thinking, and citizenship skills are thus strengthened. This is necessary to achieve societal progress instead of progress for small, already privileged groups. This is a prerequisite for good policy in the context of widespread global uncertainties, misinformation, and increasing environmental degradation. This is also needed to resist opposition from entrenched interests.

This may all seem complicated and distant, but it is not. The ability to engage in good conversation is within us; it often lies dormant, waiting to be used. citizens' assemblies can showcase this. That's why they must be conducted transparently, allowing people to observe and learn from them. citizens' assemblies already demonstrate that people with very different

backgrounds and opinions can come together to make decisions on highly complex issues. And that is exactly what is needed!

The time for turning a blind eye to the facts is over: we are in the midst of an extinction wave, and we must do everything we can to preserve life and avoid great suffering.

Another Societal Intervention

Another societal intervention is the need for a broad societal dialogue about the climate and ecological crisis and, therefore, about the polycrisis. The time for turning a blind eye to the facts is over: we are in an extinction wave, and we must do everything we can to preserve life and avoid great suffering. Let's start discussing what we are going to do about it. We know that behavioral change and an industrial transition are necessary, and we also know that some coercion will be unavoidable. We are moving toward a Netherlands with much less energy consumption, waste, pesticides, and plastics, a Netherlands where we fly less, have fewer cars, and eat less meat. The good news is that this is all possible, and if we do this, (almost) all of us will benefit from it—more health, more free time, more nature, and more happiness. It's possible, and it must happen; there are books full of how to achieve it. That we are not doing it yet is because it conflicts with the interests of current powerholders.

Necessary: Design Interventions

How can we ensure that citizens' assemblies incorporate this? It is clear that this will require a lot of time and effort from the participants. We must ensure that enough people are willing to participate and that sufficient participants remain active throughout the entire process. It would be incredibly helpful if the participants are aware of the importance of their work, receive sufficient support, are properly compensated, and are protected against any negative consequences.

To motivate people to participate, it's important to clearly communicate in advance:
- The necessity of this citizens' assembly
- That the citizens' assembly will decide how the Netherlands should deal with the polycrisis now and in the future, and that the government will implement the assembly's directives
- That safeguards will be built in to ensure the citizens' assembly process runs smoothly and that its directives are feasible, effective, and fair
- That participants will be well compensated, including care for their families, their employers will be reimbursed, and there will be sufficient (legal) protection and support (not just interpreters and the like, but also psychological and physical support)
- That public support will be fostered

A lot will be asked of the participants. The OECD describes that a meaningful citizens' assembly requires a minimum of 40 contact hours, and the French climate assembly had more than 100 contact hours (many participants felt even that was insufficient). Participants will also be expected to prepare by reading materials, traveling to meeting locations, and staying in hotels. Some of it can likely be done from home via video conferencing, but the process works best when people meet in person.

It is important that the citizens' assembly does not take too long. In the Netherlands, it has already taken over four years from the initial idea to the actual start. This is shameful when you understand the opportunities that have been missed and the damage caused by unwanted and unnecessary greenhouse gas emissions and environmental destruction. Now that it is finally starting, the process of the citizens' assembly should not take more than 2–3 months. The problem demands it, it keeps things manageable for the participants, and media attention can be sustained. Ideally, people will be given 2–3 months off from work, during which they spend about half of that time on the citizens' assembly.

To make this possible, the process needs to be well-prepared on one hand and flexible on the other, allowing the citizens' assembly to decide after each week how the program for the next week will look. Flexibility during the work weeks is also needed. However, since we know that economic, social, and political transformations are necessary, experts, fact-checkers, and people capable of calculating the effects of various solutions can already be made available.

The first week will focus on learning about the how and why of citizens' assemblies—about power structures, consultation methods, and decision-making. At the end of the first week, the citizens' assembly will own the process and determine how the next week will proceed and what the further planning will look like.

Another Design Intervention
Another design intervention is that the citizens' assembly process will not be free from values and facts. Scientific knowledge about climate, biology, and social systems, as well as analyses of how and why governments operate as they do, must be introduced into citizens' assemblies. In climate assemblies, attention will need to be paid to the causes of the climate and ecological crisis, its relationship with other parts of the polycrisis, and the causes that stem from intertwined economic, social, and political systems. The assembly will need to engage in discussions about human values and how those could form the basis for policy.

Participants in the climate assembly will explore positions on issues such as the importance of long-term thinking, what justice means, our dependence on nature, why cooperation and connection are important, how community spirit and inclusivity can be strengthened, and how inequality can be addressed.

This might sound like a nightmare for current powerholders, who believe that poverty is a choice, that people are primarily manipulable consumers, that changes should focus on the past, and that you can distract from real problems by demonizing vulnerable groups. But if you stick to the facts, you'll know that this is nonsense. We will stop with vagueness and falsehoods and design the citizens' assembly process in such a way that it appeals to values that nearly

everyone knows: love for each other and for nature, care and compassion, a need for contact and connection, and attention to the interests of future generations.

From previous climate assemblies, we also know that after initial explanations, it became clear to the members of the citizens' assembly that the way our economy is structured leads to increasing climate disruption and decreasing biodiversity. When the French climate assembly tackled this, they were pulled back, belittled, and put in their place by President Macron. And they allowed it, under the guise of "saving what can be saved." citizens' assemblies must discuss this, ensure that there are no limitations, and that they own the process. This will take time.

What Went Wrong in Previous Climate Assemblies
What often went wrong in previous climate assemblies is our habit of managing problems by compartmentalizing them. We think that all challenges can be broken down into boxes to be solved individually. We have become accustomed to the idea that responsibilities fall within departments, divisions, and areas of expertise but not over overarching systems—not over the whole. This is actively resisted by vested interests (for vision, you go to the optician). Thus, most citizens' assemblies also formed different groups (mobility, food, agriculture, energy, built environment, nature). Naturally, this played into the hands of system protectors: you can't expect system transformations this way. That integral approach must be well embedded in the design. So, deliberation in smaller groups but frequent feedback with overarching groups. Sociocracy provides guidelines for this.

Incorporating Outcomes of Previous National Citizens' Assemblies
In the first sessions of the climate assembly, the substantive outcomes of previous national citizens' assemblies should also be incorporated. Time and again, it turned out that participants came up with proposals that politicians thought would lack public support. This *pluralistic ignorance* of politics and government is repeatedly exposed—most people are willing to make changes when necessary and when done fairly. By discussing the outcomes of previous climate assemblies, the climate assembly can hit the ground running. This provides room to review the underlying beliefs and principles carefully and think about the transformations these should lead to. KNOCA has extensive information on previous climate assemblies (globally, nationally, and locally).

THE WAY WE HAVE STRUCTURED OUR ECONOMY IS LEADING TO ACCELERATING CLIMATE DISRUPTION AND DECLINING BIODIVERSITY

Also consider the effectiveness of previous climate measures early in the process. There has been a lot of research into which climate measures are the most effective. The results of this type of research need to be combined with knowledge about ways to protect the environment and how behavior can be influenced.

A final design intervention is that the ideas of the citizens' assembly should be tested and supplemented for feasibility and effectiveness. This must be done by a mix of independent scientific experts and responsible civil servants from various ministries, under the guidance of independent process facilitators, and, if possible, with input from members of the citizens' assembly. This group could, for example, also initiate a public opinion poll (also as a change intervention). This is not only to improve the feasibility of the ideas but also to signal that we are doing this as a society. This is also part of the direct democratic process.

Conclusion: The Dutch Citizens' Assembly

The Netherlands has been working since 2020 to organize a citizens' assembly on climate challenges. Hundreds of pages have been produced in the form of reports, discussion notes, and websites. All this is aimed at squeezing the citizens' assembly into a mold that 'The Hague' finds acceptable, one that doesn't scare the powerholders. The Netherlands is choosing its own unscientific path by preparing a citizens' assembly without a mandate, without meaningful questions, and without sufficient resources. It is ignoring the urgent calls of the UN and scientists. It is also not properly learning from the experiences of previous climate assemblies.

The Dutch climate assembly will address the question: "How can we, as the Netherlands, eat, use goods, and travel in a way that is better for the climate?" Concepts such as 'the Netherlands,' 'eating,' 'goods,' and 'better for the climate' are being heavily restricted. The citizens' assembly may make suggestions, and the parliament has promised to discuss them. At least six meetings are planned.

This is highly problematic because it does not meet nearly all the conditions for a good citizens' assembly as described above. Organizations such as the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Climate (or whatever it's called these days), the PBL and the OFL (Dutch governmental councils), cannot or do not dare to push back and are spoiling the chance for a meaningful citizens' assembly, thus contributing to the increasing disaster caused by the climate and ecological crisis. Perhaps as compensation, they are now looking for 175 participants, one of the highest numbers I know of for citizens' assemblies. I suspect this is because under these circumstances, not the usual 80% will make it to the end, but less than half. Why would you participate in something that is meaningless?

However, not all is lost. What could save us is if the chairperson and the organization ensure that the citizens' assembly owns the process itself, that they conduct their own problem analysis without everything being pre-defined. Because climate disruption is not an isolated problem but arises from major economic, political, and social problems and is inseparable from the other parts of the polycrisis. The citizens' assembly may not meet the conditions set by the House of Representatives, but it will make it clear to the Netherlands that changing systems is in the country's best interest and that it is possible. The assembly must also ensure there is enough support to force the government to implement the citizens' assembly's directives. Much more work, but worthwhile. The currently allocated budget will not suffice, assuming it remains available if the citizens' assembly essentially ignores the parliament's directive. This should not be a problem if a crowdfunding campaign is launched and NGOs contribute funds. The members of the citizens' assembly will not need six meetings but rather six weeks available over a period of 2–3 months. This will undoubtedly deter many people from entering the lottery for a spot in the citizens' assembly. They will be hesitant about an intensive and lengthy involvement that greatly impacts their private lives and many obligations. It would be helpful if employers made it clear that if one of their employees is selected, they will be granted at least unpaid leave, with insurance and pension rights continuing. A good citizens' assembly is, after all, also in their interest. The importance of the climate assembly must be communicated with a major public campaign. If politicians do not allow space for this, NGOs will also have to step in.

The Dutch climate assembly is expected to start later this year. No one knows what the political climate in The Netherlands will be like by then. But that should not really matter; a citizens' assembly is, as they say, *Beyond Politics*. It would be an honorable move for political parties to adopt the above and promise to implement the directives of the citizens' assembly.

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