Reflections

The Extinction Rebellion and going beyond politics: can deliberation be the answer in climate mitigation?

JANETTE HUTTUNEN

Huttunen, J. (2024) The Extinction Rebellion and going beyond politics: can deliberation be the answer in climate mitigation? *Fennia* 202(1) 163–168. https://doi.org/10.11143/fennia.142467

The United Nations (UN) has characterized the climate crisis as 'the defining crisis of our time' (United Nations 2023). To address the crisis in the 2020s, the so-called new climate movement has emerged to protest the inadequate climate action taken by political power holders and to demand real political action on climate issues. One of the movement's branches is Extinction Rebellion, which has three central demands: demand for the government to 'act now' (to halt biodiversity loss and reduce greenhouse-gas emissions to net zero by 2025), to 'tell the truth (by declaring climate emergency) and to 'go beyond politics' by introducing a Citizens Assembly on climate and environmental justice. The question, however, is how impactful these demands, and by extension, actions, can be to address the issue of the climate crisis. This Reflection takes a critical view of Extinction Rebellion's third goal, going beyond politics, and discusses the potential issues with the impact of the proposed Climate Assembly.

Keywords: Citizens' Assemblies, Climate Assembly, Extinction Rebellion, climate movements, deliberative democracy

Janette Huttunen (https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0683-9344), Social Science Research Institute, Åbo Akademi University, Finland. E-mail: janette.huttunen@abo.fi

Extinction Rebellion

The Extinction Rebellion movement was founded in 2018 in the United Kingdom by Roger Hallam. It has spread into a global movement (Fotaki & Foroughi 2022), with numerous chapters across the globe; however, the highest density of local groups was found in the Global North (Gardner *et al*. 2022). The movement uses civil disobedience to demand action in the face of the climate crisis. In contrast to other branches in the new climate movement, which are characterized by their large-scale global demonstrations, the Extinction Rebellion makes use of a broader repertoire of smaller and

URN:NBN:fi:tsv-oa142467
DOI: 10.11143/fennia.142467

more disruptive protests using non-violent civil disobedience and direct action (de Moor *et al*. 2021; Buzogany & Scherhaufer 2022), such as street blockades, throwing paint or soup on artwork, or gluing oneself to protest sites. The Extinction Rebellion has a broader and more diverse age profile than other groups focused on environmental direct action in the 2020s, yet also typically mobilizes women and highly educated people from a higher socio-economic background (Saunders *et al*. 2020).

Can a climate Assembly be impactful in the fight against climate crisis?

With its demand to 'go beyond politics,' the Extinction Rebellion demands the introduction of a new deliberative institution, a climate Citizens' Assembly (Simpson 2021). Different types of deliberative processes have become increasingly popular globally and are implemented in different political contexts (Goldberg & Bächtiger 2023), and there has even been talk of a 'deliberative wave' (OECD 2020). The Extinction Rebellion's proposed climate Citizens' Assembly is essentially a deliberative mini-public. Mini-publics are institutions designed to implement the principles of, and hopefully realize, deliberative democracy (Ryan & Smith 2014). In a typical mini-public, a randomly selected group of citizens first receive information, whereafter, they deliberate in small groups facilitated by trained moderators (Grönlund *et al*. 2022). The process involves dialogue and an exchange of arguments and is built on assumptions of free public reasoning, equality, and mutual respect (Michels & Binnema 2018). Mini-publics may play different roles in different political systems (Goodin & Dryzek 2006). However, a common concern is that they are not meaningfully connected to traditional arenas of power, such as parliaments, which limit their impact (Curato & Böker 2016). Thus, the question becomes: Can climate assemblies bring a solution to the fight against climate crisis[1]?

Some deliberative mini-public advocates are optimistic about the impact of climate assemblies (Willis *et al*. 2022; Ejsing *et al*. 2023). Willis and others (2022) suggest that deliberative-based reforms to representative democratic systems are necessary and can potentially be transformative in climate action. However, we still know little about deliberative processes' impact on policymaking, politics, and society. Mini-publics have been proposed to strengthen democracy as they give people more of a voice (Michels & Binnema 2018), but studies on deliberations' macro-effects are still rare (see Pogrebinschi & Ryan 2017). For a large part of their history, deliberative mini-publics have been organized as experiments with little or no direct connection to decision-makers or formal decision-making structures (King & Wilson 2023), and there are only very few examples in which deliberative mini-publics have been formally empowered as part of decision-making processes (Goodin & Dryzek 2006). Some studies find that deliberation can influence policymaking, while other analyses suggest that deliberative processes have a limited impact on (local) policymaking – and that the impact varies and can be indirect (e.g. encouraging citizenship or enhancing participants' social capital or building political pressure) (Goodin & Dryzek 2006; Michels & Binnema 2018; Lewis *et al*. 2023). Studies suggest that the policy impact of a deliberative mini-public may be dependent, for example, on the connection to civic society, the policy issue, and process design (Michels & Binnema 2018), related to how connected and embedded the deliberative process is with (local) politics (Caluwaerts & Reuchamps 2016; Hendriks 2016) and how tangible the issues are (Pogrebinschi & Ryan 2017; Michels & Binnema 2018). These findings present challenges for deliberative climate Citizens' Assemblies. As climate is a vast and complex policy area with no easy solutions, and as the question is most certainly not local but global, the impacts of climate Citizens' Assemblies may be limited.

The scale of the climate crisis, weak political mandate – issues for impact

The climate Citizens' Assemblies come with a democratic promise of being able to foster societal change and produce new solutions around topics such as the climate crisis (Willis *et al*. 2022; Ejsing *et al*. 2023). However, empirical examples of climate Citizens' Assemblies suggest that they have had limited success in fostering any transformative political change concerning instituting concrete climate policies and that there are challenges related to, for example, agenda-setting, political mandate, design, and the role of politicians, which hinder their impact and ability to foster political change, or even lead to their democratic shortcomings (Ejsing *et al*. 2023). Elstub and others (2021),

for example, found an issue with the scale of the climate crisis and fitting it into a deliberative process: the complexity of the issue and the attempts to adapt the scope of a mini-public to match the exceptional scale of the climate crisis compromised the participants learning, the co-ordination of recommendations by the assembly, the participants' endorsement of the recommendation, and in the end also the extent of the impact of the recommendations on policymakers. They see that democratization of the setting of the agenda could help in the issue. However, other studies have found that open agenda setting has led to diminished impact due to abstract and unspecified proposals, some of which already have been part of existing policies (Michels & Binnema 2018).

The Citizens' Assembly envisioned by the Extinction Rebellion is a deliberative process that gives recommendations that the government must act according to (Simpson 2021). However, the Extinction Rebellion does not detail how it is ensured that the government acts according to the Citizens' Assemblies recommendations, other than by pressuring the government (*ibid*.). Extinction Rebellion states that the Citizens' Assembly should publicly announce and publish its results, list those in government responsible for action, and hold regular reunions to pressure the government to act (*ibid*.). Nevertheless, no more detailed mandate is described, leading to further suspicion that the impact of the Extinction Rebellion proposed climate Citizens' Assembly may be limited.

The impact of climate Citizens' Assemblies largely depends on their political mandate. The political mandate derives from the political establishment since Citizens' Assemblies are organized, at least hopefully, in connection with political institutions, and their recommendations are aimed at political authorities. Evidence from local climate Citizens' Assemblies suggests that an unclear mandate, that is, no clear political purpose, and lack of processes to how the recommendations are intended to be used leaves the assemblies' impact lacking and role marginal (Ejsing *et al*. 2023; Lewis *et al*. 2023). Citizens' Assemblies are rendered into a 'consultative role' without agenda-setting or decision-making power. Implementing a Citizens' Assemblies recommendations depends on political power dynamics and institutional capacities (Lewis *et al*. 2023). Since governments can react positively to Citizens' Assemblies recommendations or ignore the call to adopt specific policies altogether, the outcome and impact depend significantly on the political establishment. For example, Ejsing and others (2023) suggest that to increase the political influence of climate Citizens' Assemblies, the climate Citizens' Assemblies should have a stronger political and legally binding mandate and more resources to allow them to become an actor in their own right. For Citizens' Assemblies to have real power, official links between them and other parts of the political system need to be established (Elstub & Khoban 2023). However, even institutional connections may be insufficient on their own. Thus, there needs to be a willingness to build connections between actors and engage in communicative spaces also from the decision-maker's side (Hendriks 2016).

A stronger mandate is important. However, even if climate Citizens' Assemblies got a stronger political mandate, it is unclear whether it would be sufficient: the external political context, internal dynamics, and deliberations institutional design constrain the Citizens' Assemblies (Ejsing *et al*. 2023). The recommendations must fit into the existing political system (*ibid*.). Criticism continues that even when mini-public's recommendations seem to be implemented, that could actually be the result of 'cherry-picking' or 'retro-fitting', that is, authorities have only selected recommendations that were already planned to be implemented while ignoring the rest (Smith & Wales 2000; Elstub & Khoban 2023). Vrydagh (2022) found that recommendations that diverge from authorities' prior priorities are unlikely to be adopted. Citizen assemblies try to overcome the critique of lacking impact by getting linked to other democratic institutions, such as referendums or governments and parliaments (Elstub & Khoban 2023). However, this does not happen with the climate Citizen Assemblies.

The Extinction Rebellion wants a consultative deliberative process that makes recommendations for representative decision-makers. Since the Extinction Rebellion does not seek to make the Citizens' Assemblies an actor on its own, a stronger mandate or connection to other democratic institutions for the deliberative processes is unlikely. Even when adopted, the citizen assemblies use influence at the discretion of the elected representatives (Elstub & Khoban 2023). The Extinction Rebellion's Climate Assembly would suffer from this as well: the success would be left in the hands of elected officials. The Extinction Rebellion notes that citizen pressure on the government, and therefore citizen awareness of the Citizens' Assembly's recommendations, is important because it makes the recommendations

harder to ignore – "more pressure equals more action" (Simpson 2021). This notion, however, also highlights that Extinction Rebellion understands that despite establishing a Citizens' Assembly, its recommendations are not automatically taken into consideration or implemented by governments – despite the movement's demand that they must be.

The question of whether 'one solution fits all' work in the context of climate policies is also central. The demand for deliberative democracy overarches geographical boundaries as local sectors of the movement repeat the same demand for Citizens' Assemblies in different parts of the globe. However, different political systems and actors may be more willing to give deliberative processes a stronger mandate at different times.

Slaven and Heydon (2020) claim that the deliberative solution to the climate crisis that Extinction Rebellion proposes may risk the radical goals that the movement envisions since, instead of democratic reimagination, the societal power structures would remain the same. Since elected officials have been incapable of implementing climate policies to mitigate the climate crisis, what can be expected to change when the decision-making is once again left in the same hands?

Democratic promise, limited impact

Despite the critical perspectives on Citizens' Assemblies presented above, there are reasons to give climate assemblies the benefit of the doubt regarding impact: Citizens' Assemblies have been used for a fairly short time, yet the implementation of recommendations may take even years (King & Wilson 2023). Even if there had been a willingness to implement the Citizens' Assembly recommendations, there might not have been enough time. Additionally, as Goodin and Dryzek (2006) argue, the impact can take many forms. It can be, for example, about actual policymaking, being taken up in a policy process, informing public debates, legitimizing public policies, building confidence in policies, popular oversight, or resisting co-option. The climate Citizens' Assemblies could have many types of impact, as deliberative processes are shown to lead to, for example, high participation satisfaction.

However, when evaluating the potential policy impact of the Extinction Rebellion movement's 'go beyond politics' demand, one cannot help but be a skeptic. The movement's statements regarding their 'go beyond politics' demand reflect their firm stance that to act in the climate crisis effectively, deliberative public guidance of state response is needed (Slaven & Heydon 2020). Despite that the climate Citizens' Assemblies come with a democratic promise of being able to foster societal change and produce new solutions around topics such as climate crisis (Willis *et al*. 2022; Ejsing *et al*. 2023), empirical examples of climate Citizens' Assemblies suggest that the Citizens' Assemblies have had a limited success to foster any transformative political change concerning instituting concrete climate policies. There are challenges related to, for example, agenda-setting, political mandate, the process design, the tangibility of the global policy issue, and the role of politicians, which may hinder their impact and ability to foster political change or even lead to their democratic shortcomings (Ejsing *et al*. 2023). Even more importantly, citizen assemblies do not contest societal power relations or radically reimagine democracy (Elstub & Khoban 2023). The proposed Citizens' Assemblies leave climate mitigation and finding the solutions to the hands of elected representatives. Without a clear mandate and political power, climate Citizens' Assemblies can do little more than give recommendations, hoping they will be realized in decision-making.

Perhaps the hope is put on citizen reaction; If the government ignores the Citizens' Assemblies recommendation, it can lead to citizens' dissatisfaction with the system or even citizen apathy, or alternatively to protest (Lewis *et al*. 2023). Even after going beyond politics, the climate strike movement must continue to pressure decision-makers in the face of inadequate climate mitigation.

Notes

[1] In recent years, climate CAs at both local and national levels have been organized in several countries. Climate CAs have been mainly held in Europe, but their functionality in other contexts has also been discussed (e.g., Kainuma *et al*., 2023).

References

Buzogany, A. & Scherhaufer, P. (2022) The new climate movement: organization, strategy and consequences. In Jörgens, H., Knill, C. & Steinebach, Y. (eds.) *Routledge Handbook of Environmental Policy*, 358–380. Routledge, London. https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.33766.50240

Caluwaerts, D. & Reuchamps, M. (2016) Generating democratic legitimacy through deliberative innovations: the role of embeddedness and disruptiveness. *Representation* 52(1) 13–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/00344893.2016.1244111

Curato, N. & Böker, M. (2016) Linking mini-publics to the deliberative system: a research agenda. *Policy Sciences* 49(2) 173–190. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-015-9238-5

Ejsing, M., Veng, A. & Papazu, I. (2023) Green politics beyond the state: Radicalizing the democratic potentials of climate citizens' assemblies. *Climatic Change* 176(6) 73. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03550-z

Elstub, S., Carrick, J., Farrell, D. M. & Mockler, P. (2021) The scope of Climate Assemblies: lessons from the Climate Assembly UK. *Sustainability* 13(20) 11272. https://doi.org/10.3390/su132011272

Elstub, S. & Khoban, Z. (2023) 9 Citizens' assemblies: A critical perspective. In Reuchamps, M., Vrydagh, J. & Welp, J. (eds.) *De Gruyter Handbook of Citizens' Assemblies*, 113–126, De Gruyter, Berlin. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110758269-011

Fotaki, M. & Foroughi, H. (2022). Extinction Rebellion: green activism and the fantasy of leaderlessness in a decentralized movement. *Leadership* 18(2) 224–247. https://doi.org/10.1177/17427150211005578

Gardner, P., Carvalho, T. & Valenstain, M. (2022) Spreading rebellion?: The rise of Extinction Rebellion chapters across the world. Environmental *Sociology* 8(4) 424–435. https://doi.org/10.1080/23251042.2022.2094995

Goldberg, S. & Bächtiger, A. (2023) Catching the 'deliberative wave'? How (disaffected) citizens assess deliberative citizen forums. *British Journal of Political Science* 53(1) 239–247. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0007123422000059

Goodin, R. E. & Dryzek, J. S. (2006) Deliberative impacts: the macro-political uptake of mini-publics. *Politics & Society* 34(2) 219–244. https://doi.org/10.1177/0032329206288152

Grönlund, K., Herne, K., Jäske, M. & Värttö, M. (2022) Can politicians and citizens deliberate together? Evidence from a local deliberative mini-public. *Scandinavian Political Studies* 45(4) 410–432. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9477.12231

Hendriks, C. M. (2016) Coupling citizens and elites in deliberative systems: the role of institutional design. *European Journal of Political Research* 55(1) 43–60. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12123

King, M. & Wilson, R. (2023) Local government and democratic innovations: reflections on the case of citizen assemblies on climate change. *Public Money & Management* 43(1) 73–76. https://doi.org/10.1080/09540962.2022.2033462

Lewis, P., Ainscough, J., Coxcoon, R. & Willis, R. (2023) The messy politics of local climate assemblies. *Climatic Change* 176 76. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-023-03555-8

Michels, A. & Binnema, H. (2018) Assessing the impact of deliberative democratic initiatives at the local level: a framework for analysis. *Administration & Society* 51(5) 749–769. https://doi.org/10.1177/0095399718760588

de Moor, J., Catney, P. & Doherty, B. (2021) What hampers 'political' action in environmental alternative action organizations? Exploring the scope for strategic agency under post-political conditions. *Social Movement Studies* 20(3) 312–328. https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2019.1708311

OECD (2020) *Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions: Catching the Deliberative Wave.* OECD Publishing, Paris https://doi.org/10.1787/339306da-en

Pogrebinschi, T. & Ryan, M. (2017) Moving beyond input legitimacy: when do democratic innovations affect policy making? *European Journal of Political Research* 57(1) 135–152. https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-6765.12219

Ryan, M. & Smith, G. (2014) Defining mini-publics. In Grönlund, K., Bächtiger, A. & Setälä, M. (eds.), *Deliberative Mini-Publics: Involving Citizens in the Democratic Process*, 9–26. ECPR Press, Colchester.

Saunders, C., Doherty, B. & Hayes, G. (2020) *A new climate movement? Extinction Rebellion's activists in profile.* CUSP Working Paper No 25. Centre for the Understanding of Sustainable Prosperity, Guildford. https://cusp.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/WP25-XR-report_final.pdf

Simpson, N. (2021) XR fundamentals: go beyond politics. Rebellion Global 05.01.2021. https://rebellion.global/blog/2021/01/05/citizens-assembly-climate-change 19.10.2023.

Slaven, M. & Heydon, J. (2020) Crisis, deliberation, and Extinction Rebellion. *Critical Studies on Security* 8(1) 59–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2020.1735831

Smith, G. & Wales, C. (2000) Citizens' juries and deliberative democracy. *Political Studies* 48(1) 51–65. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9248.00250

United Nations (2023) The climate crisis – a race we can win. United Nations 10.02.2023. https://www.un.org/en/un75/climate-crisis-race-we-can-win 08.01.2024.

Vrydagh, J. (2022). Measuring the impact of consultative citizen participation: Reviewing the congruency approaches for assessing the uptake of citizen ideas. *Policy Sciences* 55(1) 65–88. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11077-022-09450-w

Willis, R., Curato, N. & Smith, G. (2022) Deliberative democracy and the climate crisis. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 13(2) e759. https://doi.org/10.1002/wcc.759