

# **Rethinking Society in Times of Climate Crisis**

*The Transformative Potential of Citizens'  
Assemblies*

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*Master's Thesis in Development, Environment and  
Cultural Change*

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the transformative potential of citizens' assemblies on climate change (climate assemblies). Citizens' assemblies are a type of 'deliberative mini-public': a body of randomly selected citizens that learns and deliberates about public issues to then inform political decisions. Since participating citizens are not constrained by party politics nor influenced by the powerful lobby of vested interests, proponents of climate assemblies hope that they can help overcome the current political impasse in the climate debate. I am interested in the potential of climate assemblies to support and navigate transformations towards sustainability (i.e. far-reaching and systemic change), which involves the capacity to consciously rethink and remake unsustainable systems, structures, and practices, and to imagine alternatives. Therefore, there is a need for inclusive democratic spaces where different transformation pathways can be debated. I critically examine to what extent the design of the Irish *Citizens' Assembly's* sessions on climate change (2017) and the French *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (2019) facilitated the rethinking of unsustainability by participants. Shortcomings found include inadequate support for deliberation on underlying values, limited space for dissenting views, lack of commitment from governments, and over-reliance on expertise at the expense of democratic debate and citizen empowerment. Based on these, I develop a proposal that envisions climate assemblies as imaginative spaces, that is, forums that are characterised by conscious reflection, creativity, and contestation of otherwise unquestioned narratives. Ultimately, I argue that the transformative potential of climate assemblies lies in their ability to provide a forum for reflection and debate, where citizens can deliberate about the future of their society. Yet, to harness this potential, climate assemblies would have to move away from the logic of solutionism and become more open-ended, disruptive, and imaginative.

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## List of Acronyms

CCC	Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat
COP	Conference of the Parties
ICA	Irish Citizens' Assembly
IPCC	Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development

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## 1. Introduction

“We are on a highway to climate hell with our foot on the accelerator,” UN secretary general António Guterres warned world leaders at the opening of the COP27. This highway is one of continuing dependency on fossil fuels, ever-increasing production and consumption, and the prioritisation of economic growth over stability of the Earth system. Its destination is a world where extreme weather events – think of the catastrophic floods that hit 33 million Pakistanis in 2022, or the record droughts that affected crop yields across the northern hemisphere during the summer of that same year – will no longer be the exception. That this is the direction that humanity is going towards has been known for a long time. Scientists put up the first warning signs in the 1970s; signs that have continuously gotten more alarming. The most recent IPCC report concludes that, “[w]ithout immediate and deep emissions reductions across all sectors, limiting global warming to 1.5°C is beyond reach” (IPCC 2022). Not only are such major emission cuts required to start rapidly; they also have to be strengthened and sustained throughout the coming decades. The depth of change needed is captured by the term ‘transformation’, which is used to describe the fundamental shift towards sustainability and connotes “major, fundamental change, as opposed to minor, marginal, or incremental change” (Feola 2015, 377). It is widely recognised that avoiding dangerous climate change requires structural changes in society that go beyond technological innovation alone to include political, economic, and social structures (O’Brien and Sygna 2013). In other words, it is not enough to slow down. We need to exit this highway.

However, it is unclear that existing political processes in today’s democracies are up for the task. In fact, it is often said that democracy itself is in crisis (Ercan and Gagnon 2014). Trust in democratic institutions, membership of political parties, and electoral turn-out have all been on the decline, voting behaviour has become more erratic, and populist parties have become an integral part of the political landscape (Van Reybrouck 2016). Political campaigns increasingly depend on private donors, which increases the risk of policy capture by the rich (Cagé 2020; OECD 2016). In light of the lack of effective climate action, the influence bought by polluting industries is especially disheartening. To illustrate, the five biggest oil and gas companies, and their industry groups, together have spent at least €251 million on lobbying activities to influence EU policy between 2010 and 2018, and not without success (CEO et al. 2019). Furthermore, the promotion of technocratic forms of governance could be said to have ‘hollowed’

representative democracy by gradually severing the connections between constituents and political elites (Mair 2013). Finally, the dominance of neoliberal ideology and reasoning in the political realm may also hinder transformative alternatives to take hold (Parr 2012; Brown 2015).

Both the ecological and democratic crisis, then, demand a new kind of democratic politics. The dominant Western model of consumer-capitalist, representative liberal democracy has proven inadequate to deal with these problems. It is at the intersection of these two broad challenges – the transformation towards sustainability and the renewal of democracy – that this thesis situates itself. It starts from the conviction that an ethical and just transformation towards sustainability requires a deepening of democracy. More specifically, I will examine a recent phenomenon that engages citizens in the developing of climate policy – namely citizens’ assemblies on the topic of climate change – to understand whether and how they can contribute to the transformation towards sustainability. Therefore, the research question that this thesis aims to answer is as follows: *What is the potential of citizens’ assemblies on climate change to contribute to deliberate transformations towards sustainability?* To start, the following section will provide background information on citizens’ assemblies that address climate change.

### Citizens’ Assemblies on Climate Change

The inclusion of citizens through deliberative forms of democratic participation has received significant support and attention – so much so that a recent OECD report on citizen participation talks about “the deliberative wave” (OECD 2020). This wave revolves around the potential of deliberation, i.e. “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern” (Bächtiger et al. 2018, 2). Examples of deliberative participatory processes include citizens’ panels, assemblies and juries, participatory budgeting, and deliberative polling. These different democratic innovations all fall under the umbrella term ‘deliberative mini-public’, which is a body of randomly selected citizens (corrected to be demographically representative) that learns and deliberates about public issues to then inform political decisions (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021, 2).

This thesis revolves around citizens’ assemblies, which are considered “the most robust and elaborate” out of the different models of deliberative mini-publics (OECD 2020, 36). During a citizens’ assembly, the group of citizens gets together on several

occasions over an extended period of time to go through stages of learning about the topic, consulting experts and stakeholders, deliberating amongst each other, and finally deciding on a set of collective recommendations (ibid., 37). The group of participants should be representative of the population and the idea is that they, therefore, bring with them the different views and conflicts that exist in society, thus steering political debate away from vested interests and party politics. The participants are asked to listen to the others' perspectives, and come up with ideas and solutions for the whole community (Dryzek et al. 2019).

More specifically, this thesis focuses on citizens' assemblies that deliberate on the topic of climate change, sometimes called 'climate assemblies'. In recent years, this phenomenon has gained momentum, mainly in Europe, "as an innovative approach to enhance democratic governance of the climate crisis" (Boswell et al. 2022, 1-2). This can be clearly seen from Participedia's crowdsourced database of participatory political processes. A quick search for "citizen\* assembly climate" turns up 87 examples of climate assemblies at the local, national, and supranational level.<sup>1</sup> Cities in the UK, from Oxford to Leeds, have involved citizens in the making of local climate policy (Wells, Howarth, and Brand-Correa 2021). France was home to the most high-profile national climate assembly, which was followed by, among others, Germany, Denmark, and Spain. The Global Assembly, organised in advance of the COP26 in Glasgow, brought together 100 people from all over the world to discuss how humanity can "address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way" (Global Assembly 2021).

The climate assembly model has received support from a range of actors, including "[p]oliticians, administrators, experts, engagement practitioners and social movement activists" (Boswell et al. 2022, 2). Notably, radical action group Extinction Rebellion demands that governments install citizens' assemblies on climate and ecological justice and act on their recommendations. Their activism has been an important driver for the current interest in citizens' assemblies among those who are disconcerted by the inaction of governments and who hope that "the recommendations of citizens will break through the current political impasse on climate change" (Willis et al. 2022, 6). The idea is that the participating citizens are not constrained by party politics or

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<sup>1</sup> [https://participedia.net/search?selectedCategory=case&query=citizen\\*%20assembly%20climate](https://participedia.net/search?selectedCategory=case&query=citizen*%20assembly%20climate). Accessed 28 November 2022.

Note that not all of these cases have the formal characteristics of a citizens' assembly. Additionally, for some of the cases, climate change is not the main focus.

electoral motivations nor influenced by the powerful lobby of vested interests. Therefore, climate assemblies are viewed as “a protected space, free from the exclusions and distortions that characterize existing institutions and the public sphere,” (Boswell et al. 2022, 2) where citizens can learn directly from scientists, experts and stakeholders. These hopes seem at least partially warranted as recent national climate assemblies have indeed led to recommendations for more ambitious climate action than their respective governments have been taking (Willis et al. 2022).

The empirical focus of this thesis is on two national citizens’ assemblies on climate change. The Irish *Citizens’ Assembly* (ICA), which ran from 2016 until 2018 to consider various political questions, is often cited as a success story and a precedent for other countries (Rovers 2022). It is most famous for its work on abortion, which formed the basis for the historic referendum legalising abortion. Less well known is that it was also the first citizens’ assembly to discuss national climate policy in 2017. Two years later, France was the first country with a national citizens’ assembly fully dedicated to climate. President Macron established the *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (CCC) following protests about his new climate policy. The participants’ recommendations were considered ambitious and a possible breakthrough in the French climate debate but the initial enthusiasm was later followed by disappointment when implementation of the proposals turned out to be weak (Giraudet et al. 2022). As the two first national citizens’ assemblies that considered the topic of climate change, the ICA and CCC have significantly influenced the recent surge in climate assemblies.

Citizens’ assemblies are a relevant object of study as they have been called “[a]mong the most promising democratic innovations” (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021, 1). For this reason, there is much literature on the topic despite still remaining a relatively marginal phenomenon in practice. A significant portion of this literature focuses on the ability of regular people to develop effective climate policies. My interest in transformations towards sustainability (which involve structural change beyond improved policies) broadens the scope and makes that my approach to climate assemblies is somewhat different from many other studies. Therefore, before going into more detail regarding the research at hand, the following section will take a step back and explain where I am coming from in the approach that I take.

## Taking a Critical Approach to Environmental Politics

When reflecting on how to do research on democratic innovations in times of climate and ecological crisis, I have drawn inspiration from scholarship under the heading ‘critical environmental politics’. This thesis, therefore, aims to take a critical approach to environmental politics. This requires some explanation since, in some sense, for all research to be good it should be critical, i.e. it should not take things at face value but question the subject matter rigorously. However, when referring to ‘critical theorising’, this denotes a certain posture or attitude to doing research. Such scholarship is aimed at tackling domination (Pellizzoni, Leonardi, and Asara 2022), or is at least “firmly grounded within an understanding of social structures (social inequalities), power relationships (power inequalities), and the agency of human beings (an engagement with the fact that human beings actively think about their worlds)” (Bhavnani, Chua, and Collins 2020, 2). The following intellectual traditions are prominent examples of critical theorising: Marxist/Gramscian thought, the Frankfurt school, and post-structuralism. Although some of the literature I have read and used could be said to follow in the footsteps of these traditions, this thesis does not directly draw from them.

Rather, I understand this thesis to be critical in a broader sense, in line with Robert W. Cox’s (1981) famous distinction between problem-solving and critical theory. Drawing on Gramsci, Cox argues that problem-solving theory “takes the world as it finds it, with the prevailing social and power relationships and the institutions into which they are organised, as the given framework for action”, while critical theory “stands apart from the prevailing order of the world and asks how that order came about” (Cox 1981, 128-129). In other words, research that belongs to the former helps solve problems that are posed within the terms of the prevailing perspective. Critical theory, on the other hand, calls into question the prevailing perspective or framework for action itself, including the way it defines problems and devises solutions.

In environmental politics, a problem-solving perspective portrays environmental problems, including climate change, as management and policy problems and tries to solve them within the framework of the capitalist global economy (Manuel-Navarrete 2010). An example of this is the push for market-based solutions to climate change, like carbon offset schemes. Not only are such responses insufficient (for instance because they reinforce biodiversity loss as plantations with fast-growing trees are planted to ‘offset’ carbon emissions), the hegemonic discourse that capitalism can be ‘greened’ also tends to silence voices that criticize the market logic for being the problem rather than the solution

(Kenis and Lievens 2014). Therefore, a problem-solving approach to environmental politics could be characterised as conservative as it “intended or unintended, sustain[s] the existing order” (Cox 1981, 130). According to Strippel and Bulkeley (2013) initial social scientific interest in climate change was characterised by research that outlined the social, political, and economic effects of a warming world in a manner that took concepts and constructs of the social and political world as given. This involves “discussing mitigation and adaptation as unproblematically carried out from, and by, these [dominant socio-political] structures, without challenging them in any significant fashion” (Manuel-Navarrete 2010, 782). Climate governance then becomes a depoliticised endeavour aimed at finding the right policies and technologies.

However, in the last decade or so, a distinctly critical strand of social scientific research engaging with the climate and ecological crisis has firmly established itself. This scholarship “seek[s] to probe and deconstruct the assumed building blocks of the social world, not only to bring new forms of meaning to the climate change issue, but also as a means to advance social science theorization itself” (Strippel and Bulkeley 2013, 2). Such critical and creative thinking is necessary to destabilize dominant narratives and arrangements in order to open up space for political alternatives (Lövbrand et al. 2015). Nevertheless, critical approaches to environmental politics remain marginal. Hammond (2021b) has examined abstracts of articles published in the journal *Environmental Politics*, a leading generalist journal in the field, in the period from 2015 to 2019. She found that only 22.1% of articles fell into the category of “critical/imaginative and thus status quo-transcending” (296) work, while the remaining 77.9% could be broadly categorised as “realist-status quo-oriented” (298).

Most of the literature on climate assemblies also falls into the latter category. To counterbalance the dominant perspective, this thesis instead aims to take a critical and imaginative approach to climate assemblies, which aligns well with my theoretical focus on the need for transformation. So how does one engage in critical – as opposed to problem-solving – enquiry of climate and environmental politics? In *Critical Environmental Politics*, Death (2014) usefully identifies four types of questions that critical approaches to the study of environmental politics are sensitive to. These describe well my own attitude towards and aims for the research at hand.

The first concerns a sensitivity to the role and reflexivity of the scholar in the research process. As Cox (1981, 128) argues, “[t]heory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose.” Compared to problem-solving theory, critical theory is, therefore, “more

reflective upon the process of theorising itself” (Cox 1981, 128). Rather than being an objective observer, the researcher is considered to be “present within both the social world under study and the text produced through that study” (Death 2014, 5). This thesis is, therefore, closely connected to my perspective, derived from my position in social and political time and space (Cox 1981), which is why I have used first-person pronouns throughout the text. As Pellizzoni, Leonardi, and Asara (2022, 4) argue, a critical attitude should also necessarily involve “being alert to the dominative assumptions and outcomes hidden within one’s own intellectual posture.” For instance, postcolonial and decolonial scholarship has shed light on the dominative implications of the universalist tendencies in much Western scholarship. In this regard, it is especially important to address the Eurocentric/Western focus and bias of this thesis. Both cases I looked at are located in Western Europe, most of the literature used originates from Western contexts, and the writing process took place in Norway. Hence, my ideas about transformation, sustainability, and democratisation should be understood as rooted in a specific part of the world rather than universally applicable. That is not to say that the ideas explored are not relevant for climate politics in other parts of the world but deciding whether they are would require in-depth knowledge of specific contexts.

Second, critical theory tends to be attuned to the presence of conflict or contradictions within society and emphasizes the fundamental role of power relations (Death 2014, 5). Critical scholars argue that power structures, grounded in industrial capitalism, are at the root of the climate and ecological crisis (Manuel-Navarrete 2010). The transformation towards sustainability, therefore, requires contestation of vested interests, political inequalities, and capitalist ideology, which will be further discussed in chapter 2. Furthermore, critical scholars are wary of depoliticising climate change governance that emphasizes political neutrality and constructiveness since “[e]ven behind the most neutralising discourses seems to lurk a polemical dimension” (Kenis and Lievens 2014, 541). Acknowledging pluralism and the deeply political nature of sustainability transformations, I am looking for the potential of citizens’ assemblies to be active political spaces where contention over alternative pathways can play out, as opposed to “an elite-led engineering of citizen engagement” (Hammond 2021a, 174).

Third, critical theory is concerned with ‘big picture’ analysis, or “the attempt, however incomplete and partial and doomed to failure, to address significant trends, discursive tropes and silences, systemic characteristics, and features of the social world in some kind of holistic way” (Death 2014, 5). This follows from the fact that critical theory



“is directed to the social and political complex as a whole rather than to separate parts” (Cox 1981, 129). Within this overarching aim, it is still possible and necessary to critically analyse specific phenomena or small-scale events but not with an atomistic approach that aims “to conduct relatively self-contained, laboratory-style analysis in which variables are controlled and the dimensions of a problem are easily restricted” (Death 2014, 5). The latter type of research is ‘problem-solving’ in that it focuses on a specific sphere of action while assuming stability in other spheres (Cox 1981, 129). In this thesis, such an approach would have meant studying citizens’ assemblies in isolation by examining whether they worked in the way organisers or governments intended them to or by testing whether academic expectations about the ‘quality’ of deliberation between citizens were met. Instead, I aim to analyse citizens’ assemblies in the context of the climate and ecological crisis and the power structures and politics associated with it. Therefore, I argue that climate assemblies are closely connected to broader questions around, for instance, the inclusion of different types of knowledges in the climate debate, or the role of vested interests and ideology in devising responses to the crisis.

Fourth, critical approaches place importance on normative, moral, and ethical issues, and recognise that it is impossible to completely separate these from arguments and analysis (Death 2014). In this thesis, such a critical ethos is present in my commitment to not only environmental sustainability but also social justice and further democratisation. It is my personal and political conviction that as a society – especially in affluent parts of the world – we should undergo deep changes in order to ensure a good life for all, including future generations. Critical theory is suitable for our context of climate and ecological crisis because it, in Cox’s (1981, 130) words, “allows for a normative choice in favour of a social and political order different from the prevailing order.”

Additionally, working towards alternatives to the status quo requires imagination. However, imaginative scholarship is even more underrepresented in environmental politics research than critical perspectives are. This is illustrated by Hammond’s (2021b) examination of abstracts of articles published in the journal *Environmental Politics*. Although she added a category for imaginative perspectives, defined as “status quo-transcending theoretical visions” (296), none of the articles published in the examined period (2015-2019) fell into that category. Yet, envisioning and formulating alternatives to the current order is essential to “unsettling conventional ways of seeing and doing things” (Death 2014, 6). Hammond (2021b, 293) argues that imaginative perspectives

“have the potential to change the way we see the world; to effect the ‘defamiliar[isation] [of] the familiar’ that is the starting point toward alternative pathways away from the status quo.” Understood this way, utopian or imaginative work is not pointless dreaming but a form of resistance of an undesirable state of society (Hammond 2021b). Therefore, the critical and imaginative approach taken follows from the desire to contribute to societal transformation.

### Rationale, Questions, and Objectives

The transformation towards sustainability demands political approaches and processes that are able to support and navigate the breadth and depth of the necessary changes (Patterson et al. 2017; Hammond 2020b). This involves the capacity to consciously rethink and remake unsustainable systems, structures, and practices, and imagine alternatives (Ziervogel et al. 2016; Dryzek and Pickering 2019; Vogel and O’Brien 2021). The question, then, is whether citizens’ assemblies on climate help strengthen the “individual and collective capacities to deliberately transform systems and structures in a manner that is both ethical and sustainable” (O’Brien 2012, 667). At first sight, climate assemblies indeed seem promising. Citizens’ assemblies are often understood as the practical application of deliberative ideals (Smith and Setälä 2018; Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021). The literature on deliberative democracy promises that this talk-centric form of democracy allows for a questioning and rethinking of established values (including environmental ones) through genuine deliberation on them (Smith 2003). Deliberation is supposed to be open-ended and focussed on the common good rather than private or strategic interests (Habermas 1996; Bächtiger et al., 2018).

However, there is a tension between the critical roots of deliberation and the recent application in policy processes as an instrument to increase the legitimacy of governance (Hammond and Smith 2022). There is a danger that citizens' assemblies become assimilated to the dominant ways of thinking in climate policy making, i.e. managerial, technocratic, and target-based approaches (Blue 2015; Kahane 2016; Hammond 2020a). In its instrumental form, deliberation may be system-reinforcing rather than a form of unconstrained dialogue as imagined by political theorists (Böker 2017). As Hammond (2020a, 224) states, “[d]eliberative techniques can be put to use in the context of stakeholder governance toward managerial, reformist, ‘win-win’-oriented sustainable development, as much as they can also provide concrete spaces precisely for the

articulation of an alternative, radical sustainability discourse. Deliberation can be seen as, *and made into*, either an accommodating or a transformative practice.” In light of this ambiguity around the nature of deliberative processes, this thesis aims to critically examine the relationship between climate assemblies and transformations towards sustainability.

As stated, the research question revolves around the potential of citizens’ assemblies on climate change to contribute to deliberate transformations towards sustainability. Oxford Languages defines ‘potential’ as “latent qualities or abilities that may be developed and lead to future success or usefulness.” Determining something’s potential, thus, requires an understanding of its current functioning as well as a judgment of how it could be further developed to achieve future success. Therefore, I will explore the research question in two parts, first focusing on the current practice of climate assemblies as exemplified by the Irish *Citizens’ Assembly* (ICA) and the French *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (CCC), and then on further developing the climate assembly model. To do so, I shall address two sub-questions (SQ), the first one being:

*To what extent did the design of the ICA and CCC facilitate the rethinking of unsustainable systems, structures, and practices? (SQ1)*

I will conceptualise what it would mean for climate assemblies to rethink unsustainability and analyse relevant documents and academic studies to explore how the two cases fared in this regard. Based on this analysis and the shortcomings found, I then address the following question:

*How could the climate assembly model be further developed or changed to better align to the logic of transformation?*

I will recast the purpose of climate assemblies to revolve around opening up alternatives and outline different routes that could be taken within a climate assembly that align with this redefined purpose.

## Thesis Outline

The thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter 2 provides theoretical background regarding transformations towards sustainability and the barriers to transformation that exist in today’s democracies. It concludes that there is a need for democratic spaces where political contention over different transformation pathways can play out.

Chapter 3 explores whether climate assemblies could fulfil that role based on a discussion of the literature on deliberative democracy and mini-publics.

Chapter 4 explains the methods used and serves as a transition from the background of the thesis to my own analytical contribution.

Chapter 5 is an empirical analysis of the Irish *Citizens' Assembly* (ICA) and the French *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (CCC). I critically examine their *transformative capacity*, i.e. how they relate to the logic of transformation.

Chapter 6 is mostly a theoretical endeavour (although I give examples, where possible), in which I develop a proposal for *imaginative citizens' assemblies*, that is, forums that are characterised by conscious reflection, creativity, and contestation of otherwise unquestioned narratives, in order to open up possibilities for alternative futures.

Chapter 7 is the conclusion, in which I will return to the main research question.

## 2. Transformations towards Sustainability

Since this thesis is interested in the potential of citizens' assemblies on climate to support the transformation towards sustainability, it is important to first gain a better understanding of transformations and how they can be navigated. Therefore, this chapter will provide some theoretical background on this and will clarify my approach to transformations. First, it will introduce and discuss the concept of transformation. Then, I will expand on two aspects of transformations that are especially relevant for this thesis: building the capacity to rethink and remake society, and the political dimension of transformations. The final section moves on to discuss some of the barriers to transformation that are present in today's political processes.

### Conceptualising Transformation

In light of the escalating climate and ecological crisis, there is growing recognition of the need for “fundamental, radical, and possibly rapid change toward sustainability” (Feola 2015, 376), which has led to the emergence of the concept of transformation towards sustainability. Indeed, scientists and activists increasingly present transformation as the ‘solution’ to ecological as well as social crises (O’Brien 2012). Fazey et al. (2018, 197) point out that global ecological challenges cannot be solved by the same kinds of approaches that created them. Therefore, new technologies, improved policies and management, and behavioural changes alone will not be enough. Instead, the transformations literature emphasizes that change in response to climate change needs to be society-wide (Gillard et al. 2016). A more comprehensive response is needed, which includes changes in political, economic, social, and cultural structures and includes the personal, organizational, institutional, and systems level (O’Brien and Sygna 2013).

Transformation, more generally, can be defined as “the altering of fundamental attributes of a system” (IPCC 2012, 564) or as “physical and/or qualitative changes in form, structure, or meaningmaking” (O’Brien and Sygna 2013, 1). It is a process that can involve multiple dimensions and scales across society, from the individual and community level to the national or even global level. O’Brien (2012, 671) provides the following (non-exhaustive) list of areas where transformation may take place: “energy and agricultural systems, financial systems, governance regimes, development paradigms, power and gender relations, production and consumption patterns, lifestyles, knowledge production systems, or values and world-views.” As an individual process, transformation

may refer to “an internal shift that results in long-lasting changes in the way that one experiences and relates to oneself, others, and the world” (O’Brien and Sygna 2013, 1).

Transformative change is often defined in contrast to incremental adjustments that do not affect fundamental aspects or structures of society (Feola 2015). This distinction is similar as that between reformist versus radical change (O’Brien 2018). Responses are generally considered transformational based on their scale, novelty, and/or spatial reach (Gillard et al. 2016). According to Fazey et al. (2018, 198), whether change qualifies as transformation depends on three key dimensions: “(1) the intensity or quality of the change (depth of change); (2) the distribution of change (breadth of change); and (3) the timeframe through which a change occurs (speed of change).” However, these dimensions are often difficult to determine while change is happening. Small changes may also accumulate in such a way that they end up fundamentally altering a system, which makes a strict distinction between incremental change and transformation too simplistic (Fazey et al. 2018). The picture is further complicated by the fact that there are often multiple processes interacting simultaneously and across scales, which adds to the dynamic, non-linear, and largely unpredictable nature of transformations (Patterson et al. 2017; O’Brien and Sygna 2013).

Those changes that ‘count’ as transformative can be further categorised into ‘emergent’ and ‘deliberate’ transformation (O’Brien 2012). Sometimes this distinction is made in different terms, such as between ‘active’ versus ‘forced’ or between ‘anticipatory’ versus ‘reactive’ transformations (Feola 2015). Transformation can be said to be emergent when it is an unintended or unexpected consequence of a process or event. Deliberate transformations, on the other hand, are those fundamental shifts in society that are carried out because of a particular goal or the intention to enact change. Such change involves a conscious rethinking of the status quo, including “the questioning of values, the challenging of assumptions, and the capacity to closely examine fixed beliefs, identities and stereotypes” (O’Brien, 2012, 670). Deliberate transformation is often initiated by small groups of committed individuals but ultimately lead to wider shifts in behaviours through changing norms and beliefs (Fazey et al. 2018).

The interest of this thesis lies with such deliberate or actively navigated transformations. More precisely, this thesis aims to contribute to a deliberate transformation towards sustainability, which can be characterised as “consciously creating alternative futures that include ethics, values, and sustainability explicitly” (Ziervogel et al. 2016, 6). As such, the concept should be understood as normative rather

than purely descriptive. I use the preposition ‘towards’ to signify transformation as an open-ended and ongoing process, though for brevity's sake I will sometimes use the more common 'sustainability transformations'. Additionally, the term ‘sustainability’ needs to be clarified as its meaning differs between contexts and is highly contested. One of the most prominent examples in the political arena is the Brundtland Report’s conception of ‘sustainable development’ (WCED 1987), which aimed to balance the growth-based developmental model with environmental sustainability. However, my understanding of sustainability aligns with the more recent discourse on sustainability transformations, which is critical of the growth-dependent socioeconomic model of capitalist societies, and starts from a different premise altogether: “Emerging in the context of climate emergency and generally worsening, not improving, environmental conditions, sustainability transformation replaces the accommodationist sustainable development discourse with an implied insistence on far-reaching, systemic social change of modern societies” (Hammond 2020a, 222).

The shift from the sustainable development discourse to sustainability transformations follows from the understanding that disruptive modes of interaction with the environment are not merely a side effect but rather a characterizing trait of modern societies (Feola 2015). Whether the root cause of the climate crisis is capitalism (Moore 2017), industrialism (Steffen et al. 2011) or imperialism (Ghosh 2016), climate change is not merely an excess of greenhouse gas emissions in the atmosphere that can be ‘managed’ within existing structures. Furthermore, ecological crises are heavily intertwined with social relations of power, domination, and exploitation, which helps to explain “why it is so difficult to challenge the dominant logic of un-sustainability” (Brand and Wissen 2018, 289). What all transformative approaches therefore share is the conviction that, “[i]f the underlying causes of unsustainability are structural, only a socio-political response that addresses these can be successful” (Hammond and Smith 2017, 9).

This introduction to the concept of transformation towards sustainability has provided a basic understanding of transformations as the changing of fundamental aspects of society. Beyond this, the concept remains somewhat open to interpretation and, to a certain extent, “[t]ransformation means different things to different people” (O’Brien 2012, 670). This creates challenges as academic literature often uses the term in an ambiguous or metaphorical sense and there is no consensus on its definition (Feola 2015). On the other hand, in a time characterised by ecological as well as social crises, the transformation concept creates important opportunities by challenging assumptions about

the kind of change that is needed and stimulating creative and bold thinking (Fazey et al. 2018). That is precisely why I use the concept as the starting point for this thesis.

Although the theory of transformations towards sustainability serves as the lens through which I will look at climate assemblies, it should be noted that this is not a static theory or framework that can guide analysis in a straightforward manner. Rather, I will speak of the ‘logic of transformation’ to denote the need for far-reaching societal change as opposed to more superficial technological or managerial ‘fixes’. I will not give a definite prescription for what that future society looks like as it will have to be shaped democratically. However, it is necessary to further specify my understanding of what it takes for societies to transform and what role there is for politics. Therefore, this thesis further situates itself in the transformations literature in two ways: (1) it takes an enabling approach to transformations, which means that it emphasizes the social attributes needed for deliberate transformation, including reflexivity, agency, and imagination; (2) it recognizes that the transformation towards sustainability is deeply political and, therefore, demands political processes and approaches that are able to support and navigate it. The following two sections will further substantiate these theoretical claims.

### Rethinking and Remaking Society

Transformations are difficult to achieve and can take a long time, which is highlighted by the continuing failure to bend the global emissions curve (Stoddard et al. 2021). It is well documented that institutions are highly path dependent, which means that earlier decisions or outcomes constrain later ones (North 1990). Taking this thinking a step further, Dryzek and Pickering (2019, 23) argue that our dominant political and economic institutions suffer from what they call “pathological path dependency”, which means that they ignore or suppress information about changes in the ecological systems that they depend on in order to continue prioritizing economic concerns. Scientific knowledge on climate change as a biophysical process is, therefore, not enough to generate transformative change (Death 2014). Taking seriously what it takes for individuals, groups, and whole societies to deliberately change, this thesis, therefore, takes an enabling approach to transformations, as described by Scoones et al. (2020). This means that it focuses on “[f]ostering the human agency, values and capacities necessary to manage uncertainty, act collectively, [and] identify and enact pathways to desired futures” (Scoones et al. 2020, 68). In other words, I am interested in the social attributes



that are needed for individuals and communities to take action as opposed to technical knowledge or managerial capacity.

Deliberate transformations depend on the capacity of societies to actively change: their transformability or transformative capacity (Feola 2015). Westley et al. (2011, 764) define transformability as “the capacity to create untried beginnings from which to evolve a fundamentally new way of living when existing ecological, economic, and social conditions make the current system untenable.” Similarly, Ziervogel et al. (2016) understand ‘transformative capacity’ as “the capacity of individuals and organisations to be able to both transform themselves and their society in a deliberate, conscious way.” With regards to such a transformative capacity, Fazey et al. (2018, 210) hold that, “society is not currently very well equipped.” When the goal is creating a sustainable society, more is needed than a clear image of what such a society would look like. In fact, given the nature of transformations as being non-linear and not having a clear end point, transformability is more about navigating uncertainty and remaining engaged over an extended period than it is about executing a certain vision (Ziervogel et al. 2016; Pereira et al. 2015).

Transformability is closely related to concepts like ‘resilience’ or ‘adaptive capacity’ but can also be conceptually contrasted with these. The latter are ecologically-rooted concepts and capture how systems absorb external disturbance (Westley et al. 2011; Ziervogel et al. 2016). However, “[i]n the social world, resilience has as much to do with shaping the challenges we face as [merely] responding to them” (Davoudi 2013, 306). This means that transformability is not just reactive but involves a conscious rethinking and remaking of systems and structures that are deemed inadequate. Therefore, central to transformability and deliberate transformations (as opposed to emergent transformations) are the notions of reflexivity, agency, and imagination.

In a narrow sense, (neurological) reflexivity refers to “self-awareness that is capable of shaping the social and biological conditions that underpin actions” (O’Brien and Sygna 2013, 3). This includes an understanding of the underlying beliefs and assumptions associated with an activity. In a broader sense, Dryzek and Pickering (2019, 12) argue that the main requirement for a politics of the Anthropocene is reflexivity, or “a permanent capacity to rethink everything: institutions, practices, social structures, worldviews, principles, and systems.” This involves what O’Brien (2018, 156) calls the ability to “‘look at’ rather than ‘look through’ one’s beliefs and to question what is socially or culturally given, rather than to consciously or unconsciously accept them as

filters through which the world is viewed.” Reflexivity in this sense includes the ability to question core commitments or values and - if necessary - change them in response (Dryzek and Pickering 2019). It is not just an individual trait but can also be understood as a societal capacity. In short, critical reflection on individual and collective beliefs and paradigms works as an important catalyst for transformation (O’Brien 2018).

Of course, for change to happen reflection then needs to lead to action. Therefore, Ziervogel et al. (2016, 7) put “a well-developed sense of agency” forward as one of the foundational aspects of transformative capacity (alongside reconnection to life-support systems and social cohesion). This means that people understand themselves as active co-creators of the future rather than only passive victims of systems and structures more powerful than themselves. Similarly, O’Brien (2018, 158) argues that “[d]irectly recognizing and engaging people as agents of change can drastically speed up lowcarbon transformation processes.” An active and autonomous citizenry, as opposed to the passivity associated with consumerism, is therefore essential for the transformation towards sustainability. It is worth noting that, due to unequal distribution of power, not every individual has the same opportunities to exert their agency; an issue that will be further addressed in the following two sections.

Conscious agency does not only involve understanding oneself as an actor; it also involves the belief that society can be changed. Wright’s (2010) theory of emancipatory social transformation emphasizes that conscious projects of social change depend in large part on beliefs about what is possible, more precisely, the belief in the possibility of radically different alternatives to existing institutions. As such, “what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions” (Wright 2010, 6). Engaging in deliberate transformations, therefore, requires imagination, or creating representations of possible states of the world that can inform action (Moore and Milkoreit 2020). Individuals and communities, thus, need to be able to envision alternative futures beyond their current situation (Ziervogel et al. 2016). Therefore, transformations involve an element of transcendence and depend on “our capacity to go beyond established and entrenched boundaries and limits” (Vogel and O’Brien, 2021, 2).

The above formulation of the individual and societal capacity to transform is optimistic to say the least, as is the literature on sustainability transformations generally. I believe there is power in this as it can create energy to participate and work towards creating a better world. However, in reality, power, culture, and material as well as

mental constraints severely complicate societies' transformative capacity. Therefore, it should be noted that these notions of reflexivity, agency, and imagination are ideal-types to be worked towards while remaining ever out of reach. The following two sections will further complicate the picture, starting with the political dimension of transformations.

### Towards a Politics for Transformation

As Patterson et al. (2017, 2) accurately posit, “transformations towards sustainability are deeply and unavoidably political.” There is a large number of potential transformation pathways, which represent different and often conflicting visions for the future (O'Brien and Sygna 2013). Different actors will be affected differently by change and the distribution of costs and benefits related to transformation is a significant cause of conflict (Meadowcroft 2011). Deciding on the most appropriate course of action, therefore, involves trade-offs and the weighing of priorities (O'Brien and Sygna 2013), which brings with it problems of power and authority. As Fazey et al. (2018, 199) put it, “[i]f social change is intended to be directed in some way, then this also raises questions about for whom transformation is intended and about who decides what this direction should be.” When it comes to deliberate transformations the challenge, then, is not simply how to set change into motion but also how and by whom the transformation process can and should be navigated. This question is further complicated by the fact that the understanding of change is itself already contested due to differing framings, perceptions, and judgments regarding problem boundaries (Patterson et al. 2017).

The literature on transformations recognizes that power and politics are a central dimension of any transformation (e.g. O'Brien 2012; Olsson et al. 2014; Scoones et al. 2015). However, according to Patterson et al. (2017), the governance and politics aspects of thinking about transformations remains under-developed. Many sustainability researchers focus on policy rather than politics, that is, the climate measures that need to be implemented rather than the context that makes the implementation of these measures possible or plausible in the first place (Meadowcroft 2011). This thesis, instead, aims to contribute to developing a politics for transformation.

Here, I want to emphasize that I am committed to an explicitly *democratic* politics for transformation. In the face of the enormous societal challenges that the climate crisis poses, some environmentalist scholars find refuge in the idea of a centralised transition led by experts and technocratic elites (e.g. Shearman and Smith 2007). Stehr (2015, 449) notes that in the scientific community, there is an increasing “tendency to want to take

decisions out of the hands of politicians and the public, and, given the 'exceptional circumstances', put the decisions into the hands of scientists themselves". Others take this thinking a step further and suggest that democratic rights need to be put on hold for a while in the name of the climate (Lovelock 2010). In a time characterised by democratic backsliding and a "third wave of autocratization" (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), these are dangerous proposals.

Such anti-democratic environmentalists overlook the fact that a real transformation towards sustainability necessarily involves a variety of actors from all parts of society. Hajer et al. (2015, 1652) have coined the term 'cockpit-ism' to describe "the illusion that top-down steering by governments and intergovernmental organizations alone can address global problems." The idea that political elites or experts could set out a trajectory into the future, which then simply needs to be filled out by policymakers, rests on an oversimplified theory of change. In reality, change takes place through a complex constellation of forces and significant social energy is located in, for instance, "articulate, autonomous citizens, civil society initiatives, self-organized farmers, cities and innovative companies" (ibid., 1656).

A useful way to understand the complexity of transformations and what role there is for politics is through the 'three spheres of transformation' model, developed by O'Brien and Sygna (2013) (see Figure 1). It conceptualizes transformation as an interplay between the practical, political, and personal spheres and helps to understand "how, why and where transformations toward sustainability may take place" (O'Brien and Sygna 2013, 1). The practical sphere, which represents behaviours and technical solutions to climate change, is at the centre, surrounded first by the political sphere and then by the personal sphere. The political sphere consists of the systems and structures that enable or disable transformations in the practical sphere. The personal sphere includes individual and collective beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms, which determine how people see and understand the world, including what is deemed 'possible'. The model is relevant for this thesis as it draws attention to the fact that "realizing outcomes for sustainability in the 'practical' inner sphere calls for the transformation of systems and structures in the central 'political' sphere" (ibid., 8). In other words, there is a need for political processes that enable the transformation towards sustainability.

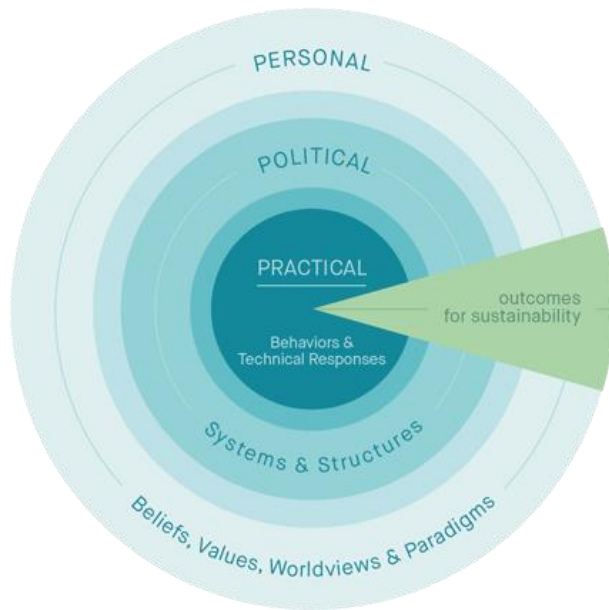


Figure 1 Three spheres of transformation model (O'Brien and Sygna 2013)

The model also draws attention to the ways in which individual and collective beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms (i.e. the personal sphere) influence how transformations are perceived, experienced, and envisioned, and what types of change are considered possible, plausible, or desirable. Transformations in the personal sphere are especially powerful because they determine how people interact with the world. Such change cannot be forced but there lies hope in working towards a vibrant and critical public sphere to support “widespread democratic engagement able to foster a collective re-thinking of taken-for-granted views” (Hammond 2020b, 174).

A commitment to a democratic approach to transformations also means that differences between individuals or groups cannot be ignored. Blythe et al. (2018) warn for the discourse that frames transformation as apolitical, inevitable, or universally beneficial, and ignores how social and cultural differentiation impacts the way in which change is experienced. In order to prevent a monopoly on defining transformations by any single framing or set of actors, a politics for transformation should, instead, “take plural pathways seriously” (Scoones et al. 2020, 70). Acknowledging that there is never only one relevant path, then, brings about the need for “space[s] to confront and discuss assumptions about which pathway — of many possibilities — will be most successful for whom, and why” (Scoones et al. 2020, 70), which is inevitably a deeply political process.

Additionally, there is a need to contest entrenched power structures since transformation, by definition, challenges the status quo, thereby threatening powerful interests that benefit from existing systems and aim to protect them (O'Brien 2012).

Therefore, deliberate transformations towards sustainability necessarily involve an element of disruption of power asymmetries that favour elites and undermine the potential for ecologically sustainable and socially just futures (Ziervogel 2016). Stirling (2014) further argues that transformations require fragmented and unruly civil society politics and knowledges that are produced independently from incumbent interests rather than orderly governance around a singular, integrated vision.

Therefore, in this thesis, the aim is not to develop a politics that is best-suited for executing a certain blueprint of what a sustainable society looks like. Rather, the interest of this thesis lies with how to “‘open up’ (rather than ‘close down’), active political spaces for critical contention over alternative pathways” (Stirling 2014, 83). Since change needs to be society-wide, such spaces should include a diversity of actors, taking extra care to ensure meaningful participation for groups that are currently poorly represented (Patterson et al. 2017). There is a need for more engagement with these questions because current political processes and spaces are severely limited in their capacity to rethink unsustainability and imagine alternatives, as the following section will further discuss.

### Real-World Barriers to Change

This section will briefly discuss how current democracies are significantly constrained in rethinking unsustainable systems and practices, and imagining alternatives. In this, I will focus on four barriers to transformation: short-termism in politics, the capture of political processes by powerful interests, technocratic policymaking, and the hegemony of capitalist ideology and discourse. These obstacles are relevant for the rest of this thesis because citizens’ assemblies on climate should be understood in their political context rather than in isolation. Climate assemblies do not replace existing parts of climate politics and governance but are an addition to it. Therefore, to make a valuable contribution they need to be able to (partially) overcome some of the weaknesses of other parts of the democratic system. The aim here is not to give a complete overview of the barriers to transformation that exist in modern society. Rather, this section will serve as the backdrop for the subsequent discussion and analysis of citizens’ assemblies on climate.

First of all, politicians as well as the media that report on politics are often criticised for being overly focused on the concerns of the day rather than issues that play out over the medium or long term. Smith (2021, 5) calls it ‘democratic myopia’ (near-

sightedness): “[t]he tendency towards short-term thinking in democratic decision-making.” This near-sightedness became painfully clear at the start of the Covid pandemic. While scientists had been warning governments about their pandemic preparedness for years, governments had been reluctant to spend money on something that most probably would not pay off during their term of office. The same is true for issues ranging from pensions, infrastructure, and health care to climate change, biodiversity, and emerging technologies. What these issues share is that they involve immediate costs, while their gains play out over the long term (Smith 2021).

According to Van Reybrouck (2016), it is not simply democracy that is to blame for the reigning ‘incidentalism’ in politics; rather it is our specific system of electoral-representative democracy. He argues we suffer from ‘electoral fundamentalism’: an excessive focus on elections at the expense of the quality of democracy (Van Reybrouck 2016, 41). With electoral terms being relatively short (between four and six years), this then leads to politicians and political parties constantly being focussed on winning votes during the next elections. Short-term and strategic party-political interests take priority over issues that transcend the electoral cycle (Hammond and Smith 2017). Such attitudes are at odds with the long-term view that is necessary for climate action, and they certainly stand in the way of meaningful reflection on underlying values. However, we cannot only blame politicians. One could say that society at large prioritizes immediate consumption practices over longer-term wellbeing. Future generations are mostly not taken into account in societal decision-making as “[t]he carbon-based nature of these practices means that the future is ‘colonized’ as a ‘resource for the present’” (Hammond and Smith 2017, 12). Overall, the focus on the present works as blinders that keep us from reflecting on the societal course of action.

A second source of constraint is the precedence of corporate and elite interests in political decision-making. One aspect of this relates to the financing of different elements of the democratic system. As Cagé (2020, introduction) puts it bluntly: “Money still occupies center stage in politics; democracy means who pays wins.” She discusses how election campaigns, the running of political parties, think tanks that advise policymakers, and the media reporting on politics are all significantly shaped by money and how attempts to restrict the financial meddling of private actors have been inadequate. Since campaign spending and election performance are closely correlated, the fact that parties increasingly depend on private donors leads to a significant risk of policy capture, which occurs when the interests of a narrow group dominate policy making (OECD 2016). This

may lead to the adoption of policies that go against public interest. Gilens (2014) has demonstrated that in the United States, government policy is almost exclusively a response to the preferences of affluent citizens, while the interests of disadvantaged groups are only served when they happen to match those of the rich. Political scientists have long held that the structural political power of the wealthy undermines meaningful democratic pluralism (Hammond and Smith 2017).

The case of the climate crisis is a particularly astute illustration of the “inverse relationship between power and privilege, on the one hand, and the interest to transform social structures, on the other” (Eckersley 2016, 352). Vested interests that benefit from maintaining business as usual have managed to significantly slow down climate action through a powerful lobby. Funded by corporations and conservative foundations, a small group of American scientists has been very influential in fuelling climate scepticism by spreading doubt and conveying scientific misinformation to the public (Oreskes and Conway 2010). In Europe, the aviation industry is one of the strongest opponents of climate policy and has pursued a successful lobbying strategy to avoid regulations (InfluenceMap 2021). At the international level, polluting industries also manage to get a seat at the table. For instance, at the latest COP27 there were more than 600 fossil fuel lobbyists, outnumbering any one frontline community that is already being affected by the climate crisis (Michaelson 2022). The political power that comes with economic power is a significant barrier to rethinking unsustainability as those who benefit from the status quo try (and often succeed) to prevent critical debate about polluting activities.

Third, in the last decades, much decision-making has moved from parliaments into ministries (where policymakers write plans in highly technical language about the future of our societies), thereby weakening democratic debate. In most countries, climate politics is now highly technocratic, as are many other policy areas. At the heart of this move towards technocracy is “the idea that all problems are technical problems, with a technical solution that can be revealed by adequately knowledgeable individuals” (Armeni and Lee 2021, 550). In the case of the climate and ecological crisis, this involves failing to acknowledge the socio-political causes and implications of the crisis. Technocratic approaches are presented as value-neutral and are strongly associated with the neoliberal catchphrase of ‘there is no alternative’, coined by Margaret Thatcher (ibid. 2021).

Even from an environmental standpoint it is often argued that in order to tackle climate change the issue needs to transcend the realm of politics, and instead be left to the



experts (Kenis and Lievens 2014). It cannot be denied that the complexity of environmental issues requires the input of scientists and other experts. However, the technocratic realm is not the place where a rethinking of unsustainable systems and practices will take place. That is because the administrative apparatus compartmentalises problems into manageable units in need of a technical solution (Hammond 2021b). Therefore, climate governance involves little reflection on the system as a whole or its underlying values. Furthermore, experts in a particular field often converge in how they define problems and solution, forming ‘epistemic communities’ (Lidskog and Elander 2007), leaving little room for unconventional ways of thinking. Essentially, “[t]he administrative, problem-solving nature of the policy process (...) leaves insufficient room for creative and imaginative responses to the complexity of the crisis” (Hammond 2021b, 288).

A fourth hindrance for reflexive responses to the climate crisis is the discursive and ideological hegemony of capitalism. In simple terms, this means that “[c]apitalism shapes the way we think about and conceive of the world, such that certain ways of being and doing are taken as given” (Smith 2021, 20). One such ‘given’ is the economic, instrumental rationality that dominates political discourse (Hammond and Smith 2017). This is, for instance, reflected in the measures for progress that are used, the most important being GDP growth, which have become widely accepted as the core goal for societies despite valuing short-term economic returns over wellbeing or the conditions needed to sustain life in the long-term and (Schmelzer 2016). Barry (2012) goes a step further in this and argues that neoclassical economics constitutes the ‘grammar’, i.e. rules of the game, of modern policymaking. This means that it “determines both the language and manner in which those wishing to influence or have input into public policymaking must express their argument” (Barry 2012, 24). In that way, contemporary capitalism is not simply what is understood as ‘common sense’ but also narrows the public discourse by ‘crowding out’ alternative, non-economic ways of arguing or valuing.

As discussed above, reflexivity involves the rethinking of all aspects of society. That does not mean that everything should necessarily change. However, norms, values, and principles underlying the way the economy is structured should at least be up for debate in the public sphere. The literature on post-growth and degrowth has effectively shown that this is not the case (e.g. Jackson 2017; Kallis et al. 2020). The ruling economic growth paradigm portrays growth as natural and necessary. Furthermore, economic growth is understood to be the precondition of other policy objectives rather

than a political goal in itself (Deriu 2012). As Hickel (2020, 4) states, “the word ‘growth’ has become a kind of propaganda term,” with a positive connotation, that obscures the fact that the process behind it is often destructive in nature. The incontestable nature of capitalist principles hinders a rethinking of the economic system. This is further exacerbated by the fact that a significant portion of economic decision-making happens at undemocratic centres of power like the World Bank and the IMF as well as by private actors such as corporations, banks and investors (Deriu 2012). Overall, the depoliticisation of the economy hampers collective reflection on its workings.

To sum up, while political debate on the climate crisis is often focused on the immediate rather than long-term future, seemingly non-political, managerial approaches to climate action remain within the framework of the status quo. Moreover, reflection and discussion on all levels are highly constrained by the power of vested interests and capitalist ideology. Therefore, in the quest for a politics that can support and navigate the deliberate transformation towards sustainability, an important requirement is whether new or alternative political processes promote a conscious rethinking of ways of living that have proved to be unsustainable.

### 3. The Transformative Potential of Deliberation

From the previous chapter follows the need for a different kind of democratic politics that can support and navigate the deliberate transformation towards sustainability. This chapter explores deliberative democracy in general and deliberative mini-publics specifically as candidates to embody such a politics. In other words, it asks: in the search for a politics for transformation, why would we turn to deliberation and mini-publics? Moreover, just as important, in what ways might these political approaches hinder transformation? The chapter covers these questions in two parts, one revolving around the literature on deliberative democracy, the other around the literature on mini-publics and climate assemblies.

#### Deliberative Democracy as Candidate for a Politics for Transformation

The first half of the chapter discusses the literature on deliberative democracy, which developed as a normative political theory but today also includes an array of empirical social science research. It will explore the connection between deliberative democracy and sustainability transformations but first, the following section will give a brief introduction to deliberative democracy as a field of study.

#### Introducing Deliberative Democracy

In *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*, Bächtiger et al. (2018, 2) characterise deliberative democracy as, “grounded in an ideal in which people come together, on the basis of equal status and mutual respect, to discuss the political issues they face and, on the basis of those discussions, decide on the policies that will then affect their lives.” It is a perspective that emphasizes the process of democratic decision-making more than its outcomes. Therefore, we can minimally define deliberative democracy as any practice of democracy that gives a central place to deliberation (Bächtiger et al. 2018, 2). More precisely, for deliberative democrats, the legitimacy of political decisions is determined by the quality of the deliberative process that produced these decisions. As Gutmann (1996, 344) argues, “the legitimate exercise of political authority requires justification to those people who are bound by it, and decision-making by deliberation among free and equal citizens is the most defensible justification anyone has to offer for provisionally settling controversial issues.”

Deliberation, then, can be defined as “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern” (Bächtiger et al., 2018, p. 2). A more precise interpretation of the concept is contested but most theorists agree that for democratic dialogue to be genuinely deliberative, it must be free of outside control, unconstrained in what arguments can be brought forward, and should aim for uncoerced agreement (Polletta and Gardner 2018, 71-72). Deliberation also needs to be inclusive in “both presence and voice”, meaning that it is open to all and that all perspectives should be heard (Smith 2003, 56-57). Therefore, the ideal to strive for is that inequalities that exist outside of the deliberations do not to have effect. Instead, what matters is that participants justify their preferences to others, giving deliberation the form of “reciprocal reason-giving” (Polletta and Gardner 2018, 72). Values that are deemed essential to deliberative democracy are “inclusive participation (...), mutual justification, listening, respect, reflection, and openness to persuasion” (Dryzek et al. 2019, 2).

The political theory of deliberative democracy emerged as a normative project in the 1980s and early 90s out of a complex process that incorporated various different approaches (Floridia 2018). The deliberative democratic understanding of legitimacy can be conceptually contrasted with aggregative democracy which bases its legitimacy on aggregating citizens’ preferences through voting.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, deliberative democracy is often understood as a critical response to the economic models of democracy that dominated the empirical social sciences in the mid-twentieth century (Chambers 2018). Additionally, early deliberative democrats offered a sharp critique of existing democratic practices, which were deemed corrupted by political domination, manipulation, and the maximisation of self-interest. They challenged systemic injustices and had the broad and emancipatory ambition to “structurally recast established expressions of social and economic power” (Hammond and Smith 2022, 99).

A philosopher whose influence on the field is unmistakable is Jürgen Habermas. He observed that political discourse and the public sphere were gripped by the instrumental rationality of the market economy and conceptualised what it means to

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<sup>2</sup> It is good to note here that the fact that deliberative and aggregative democracy contrast conceptually does not make them contradictory in practice, as much democratic decision-making includes both deliberation and voting at different stages.

instead be led by communicative rationality (Habermas 1984). The linguistic concept of ‘the ideal speech situation’ articulates the formal requirements of justification as follows: “(i) no one can be excluded, (ii) equal opportunity to speak, (iii) no deception or manipulation, (iv) no coercion or external pressure can be brought to bear” (Chambers 2018, 66). Although never fully met in real conversations, under these conditions, dialogue can be considered unconstrained or free. Mutual understanding could then be reached through “the unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas 1996, 306). In other words, in truly unconstrained dialogue (which, again, is never fully attainable in practice), claims can be evaluated on the basis of reason only (Eckersley 2004, 115-116). This can serve as a normative standard for evaluating the legitimacy of actual discourses and practices.

Deliberative democrats emphasize a number of ideals, whose content has developed over the past half-century. In describing these ideals, Bächtiger et al. (2018) distinguish between first and second-generation thinkers. For both generations, mutual respect and the absence of coercion are central values. Other values changed through critique and debate to become “more inclusive and better thought through” (Bächtiger et al. 2018, 4). For instance, the first generation viewed deliberation as the offering and receiving of reasons, with a focus on the common good, and aimed at rational consensus. This was then criticised by difference democrats, who questioned the inclusivity of this limited definition of democratic communication. As Sanders (1997, 370) puts it, “the invitation to deliberate has strings attached. Deliberation is a request for a certain kind of talk: rational, contained, and oriented to a shared problem.” She argues that deliberative standards discredit views that are presented in a different manner, for instance, impassioned or emotional. It is especially likely that the communication styles of already underrepresented groups, like women, racial minorities, and poorer people, are not seen as ‘deliberative’. Defining democratic practice as deliberation may, therefore, further allow the domination of public discourse by privileged groups (Sanders 1997).

Political philosopher Iris Young has been especially important for making the theory of deliberative democracy more sensitive to difference by reflecting on the ways in which processes of debate and decision-making reinforce power relations (Young 1996; 2002). She spearheaded a second-generation of thinking that broadened the understanding of democratic communication. Today, theorists mostly agree that deliberative democracy involves various, different forms of communication, including greeting, rhetoric, humour, testimonies, and storytelling (Curato et al. 2017, 30). The requirement to offer reasons has

been reformulated as the inclusion of “relevant considerations” (Bächtiger et al. 2018, 7). Overall, we could say that thinking about deliberative ideals has become more diverse, while remaining contested.

Additionally, the field has gone through several methodological developments. Deliberative democracy finds its roots in critical theory, which meant it was (and for some theorists still is) “oriented towards the goal of emancipation against structures of domination” (Hammond 2019, 791). While early versions of the theory were mostly conceptual, the past two decades have seen a strong empirical and practical (yet less critical) focus. Many deliberative democrats are now concerned with creating the right – often controlled – circumstances to put the deliberative ideals in practice (Neblo 2015). Deliberative mini-publics (including citizens’ assemblies), where a randomly selected group of citizens deliberates about an issue of common concern, have been of great interest because their design promises inclusive and high-quality deliberation (Smith and Setälä 2018). The second half of this chapter will further discuss this literature.

More recently, there has been a ‘systemic turn’ in the literature on deliberative democracy. Rather than focusing on isolated instances of deliberation, this perspective emphasizes that within a society, there is a variety of sites where deliberation takes place that together form a deliberative system (Mansbridge et al. 2012). As each part of the system has its own strengths and weaknesses, the important issue then becomes how these sites are coupled and connected (Smith and Setälä 2018). Deliberative democracy is currently a vast field of study, within both political theory and empirical social sciences. A significant portion of this literature focuses on deliberation about environmental issues, which the following section will further discuss.

### Linking Deliberation to Sustainability

The connection between deliberative democracy and sustainability was first made within critical environmental political theory, a field that emerged in the 1990s (Eckersley 2020). Scholars within this field critically examined the relationship between liberal democracy and ecology and coined the idea of an ecological democracy (e.g. Dryzek 1990, 1992; Eckersley 1995; Dobson 1996). According to Eckersley (2020, 214), this work was “both radically critical and radically reconstructive in its aims.” Its critical dimension is found in a critique of liberal democracy as being complicit in perpetuating the ecological crisis. Theorists aimed to show that environmental harm is not simply the result of distortions in the workings of liberal democracy. Rather, it is an inevitable by-product of liberal

democracy's ideals and institutions, such as short election cycles or the fact that territorial boundaries bear little relationship to ecological boundaries. In Eckersley's (2020, 218) words, "elected representatives are not institutionally obliged to answer to any community other than their electorates or their nation for the ecological consequences of their decisions, even when it can be clearly foreseen that other communities, now and in the future, will be seriously harmed." As a response, ecological democrats aim to reconstruct and expand the democratic boundaries of space, time, community, and agency, guided by an ecological imaginary.

While critiquing liberal democracy, these environmental political theorists also explicitly rejected authoritarian tendencies in environmental thought. Pickering, Bäckstrand, and Schlosberg (2020, 3) point out that the slow and compromising nature of democracy has led some environmentalists to argue that "a hierarchical, technocratic and centralised response featuring a strong state or 'green leviathan' (...) is necessary to avert environmental catastrophe." This critical school of environmental political theorists, on the other hand, argues that rather than forsaking democracy it needs to be deepened. As such, they are often strong defenders of deliberative democracy, so much so that we could speak of a 'deliberative turn' in environmental political theory (Lövbrand and Khan 2010). However, the relationship deliberative democracy and environmental sustainability is not immediately obvious. As Goodin (1992, 168) has aptly put it, "to advocate democracy is to advocate procedures, to advocate environmentalism is to advocate substantive outcomes." Still, various arguments have been put forward for why deliberative democracy is suitable to make societies more ecologically minded, the most relevant of which I will discuss here.

First of all, it has been argued that environmental concerns have a better chance to come into their own during deliberation than in other political processes. For instance, Smith (2003) takes the plurality of environmental values as his starting point and argues that the economic valuation used in current models of environmental governance, such as cost-benefit analysis, is not able to articulate these values. Democratic deliberation, on the other hand, "offers a conducive context within which the plurality of environmental values and perspectives on the non-human world can be voiced and considered in the political process" (Smith 2003, 76). Deliberation is more open to, for instance, ethical reasoning and as such it "would perform a releasing function for environmental concerns which, however strong, usually remain latent" (Arias-Maldonado 2007, 235).

We could, therefore, say that environmental values will more easily emerge in a deliberative context than in representative democracy or prevailing policy processes. However, this is no guarantee that the outcomes of deliberative processes will also privilege environmental values over other values. Other environmental political theorists, however, claim a more direct link between deliberative democracy and sustainable outcomes. The reasoning goes as follows: protecting environmental goods is in the interest of society as a whole but because environmental problems are complex and develop over a longer period of time, other, more immediate and tangible issues may take priority for individuals when electing representatives to parliaments (Nordbrandt 2020). Because deliberative democracy requires from participants to answer to others and give reasons for their stances, it benefits generalisable interests over sectional or purely self-serving interests (Eckersley 2020). As Arias-Maldonado (2007, 235) explains, “those options aimed at preserving ecological integrity are best placed in the Habermasian ‘ideal speech situation’ as an obvious and generalisable interest, for human survival depends on it.” Therefore, it is argued that collective deliberation leads to more environmentally minded outcomes than aggregating individual interests does. According to Nordbrandt (2020), there are indeed some empirical studies that suggest that this argument holds true in formal deliberative events.

Additionally, deliberation may be able to motivate thinking in terms of long-term consequences. Intuitive and automatic modes of thinking (referred to as the System 1 brain) are characterised by significant cognitive biases against the future (MacKenzie 2018). Deliberative settings provide incentives to engage with information in a more reflective and careful manner (Niemeyer 2014). Therefore, deliberation may encourage more analytical thinking and deeper forms of cognition (i.e. employing the System 2 brain), which can counterbalance our intuitive responses to long-term problems (MacKenzie 2018). This mode of thinking does not only attune citizens to the temporal dimension of environmental challenges, it is also more appropriate for the complexities involved. As Niemeyer (2014, 15) explains, “where environmental concern is easily crowded out in political debate, deliberation helps to make salient less tangible and complex dimensions associated with the issue.” Therefore, deliberation could mean more careful and thorough consideration of environmental issues.

Ecological democrats are also attracted to the inclusive character of deliberative democracy, which allows under- or unrepresented interests and traditionally excluded actors to be taken into account. That is because deliberative democracy “does not restrict



in advance the issues to be debated, nor the participants” (Arias-Maldonado 2007, 237). This is relevant, in the first place, because environmental harms are not shared equally; they are most often borne by already marginalised groups. The dialogic character of deliberative environmental governance fosters the uptake of local knowledge about ecosystems and could give advocates of environmental justice more opportunity to influence decision-making as “their own unique storylines can be an important mechanism for shaping policy meanings” (Baber and Bartlett 2018, 7). Furthermore, since the effects of environmental decisions are usually felt across political borders, non-citizens may also be represented during a deliberative process. This logic can be taken a step further to also include the interests of those who cannot represent themselves: future generations and non-human nature.

A fitting example here is Eckersley (2004), who aims to reconstruct the deliberative ideals to include the natural world. She defends an explicitly normative account of ecological democracy, which she bases on the principle which states that “all those potentially affected by a risk should have some meaningful opportunity to participate or otherwise be represented in the making of the policies or decisions that generate the risk” (111). Eckersley extends the familiar idea of a ‘democracy of the affected’ to include literally all those affected by a decision, regardless of, for instance, species or generation. As such, her account of an ecological democracy could be better understood as “a democracy *for* the affected” (112) since the group of beings whose interests should be considered will invariably be wider than the group of beings that actually takes part in deliberations and decision-making. The deliberative democratic framework, thus, offers possibilities for critical and creative scholarship that aims to rethink our relations with and responsibilities towards the natural world.

All these reasons have contributed to “a growing consensus around deliberative democracy as the preferred model for the realisation of the green programme” (Arias-Maldonado 2007, 233). That is not to say that there have been no critiques of the marriage between environmentalism and deliberative democracy. For instance, Lövbrand and Khan (2010, 49) argue that, “green deliberative theory is weakly linked to the practical reality in which environmental politics is played out.” Arias-Maldonado (2007) warns that deliberation is being asked more than it can deliver. Nevertheless, new modes of environmental governance often draw on deliberative democratic ideals (Bäckstrand et al. 2010). In other words, deliberation as a way to incorporate environmental interests in the democratic process has been widely embraced by scholars and practitioners alike.

However, the transformation towards sustainability requires more than sustainable outcomes out of political processes that otherwise remain unchanged, which raises the question of how suitable deliberative democracy is for enacting more far-reaching and systemic change.

### From Sustainability to Transformation: Does Deliberative Democracy Have What It Takes?

The previous chapter has sketched the outlines of a politics for transformation. In order to enable systemic change, there is a need for promoting reflexivity in political processes. Deliberative democracy, with its focus on careful consideration of different perspectives, seems to be a suitable candidate, and some deliberative democrats indeed explicitly connect deliberative democracy to transformation. However, transformation also requires contesting of power structures that uphold patterns of unsustainability. Opponents of deliberative democracy – most notably, writing from the perspective of agonistic democracy – contend that deliberation is not able to disrupt the status quo. This section discusses both of these positions, thereby exploring the question: does deliberative democracy have what it takes to enact radical change?

Deliberative democrats argue that the pursuit of a deliberative democratic political culture would increase the societal capacity for reflexivity. For instance, Hammond (2020b) holds that the currently, public discourse in most formal democracies is not diverse, reflexive, and open enough to collectively rethink taken-for-granted views, which is an essential aspect of a deep sustainability transformation. In fact, “political discourse as much as individual meaning-making have become ‘colonised’ by the instrumental rationality of the market economy” (Hammond 2020b, 185). Sustainability governance, therefore, not only requires technical or managerial capacity but also critical, vibrant and widespread democratic engagement. This could be found in the pursuit of a deliberative democratic political culture, understood as broad societal reflection and mutual exchange of perspectives.

Dryzek and Pickering (2019) also connect deliberative democracy to a more fundamental transformation of society, including a rethinking of the core aims and values of the institutions of democracy. They connect deliberative democracy to a specifically *ecological* reflexivity, which requires us to listen more carefully to ecological systems, as they argue that, “a deliberative understanding of democracy—with meaningful communication at its heart—can help render democratic institutions more responsive to

signals from the natural world” (Dryzek and Pickering 2019, 17). Rather than focusing on a singular deliberative processes, they envision a deliberative system in which different categories of agents – including scientists, the most vulnerable and their advocates, discourse entrepreneurs, and the natural world – interact with one another. This follows from the understanding that “the whole can be so much more than the sum of its parts when different categories of agents are joined in effective deliberative systems” (ibid., 127). Furthermore, these authors suggest that deliberation is especially suitable in circumstances of deep disagreement as it can resolve conflict by yielding mutually acceptable outcomes.

This focus on deliberative democracy being constructive is precisely what some opponents criticise the theory for. Within the climate debate, Pepermans and Maesele (2016) categorize the deliberative approach as part of what they term the ‘consensus-building perspective’. Authors that take this approach point out that while scientific consensus around climate change has increased, the public, media, and political discourse about the issue have become more and more polarised. This politicisation of climate change is understood to be detrimental for rational climate action: “If we want to tackle the problem effectively, it is argued, there ought to be consensus” (Kenis and Lievens 2014, 531). However, the consensus building that is central to deliberative processes may be a structural limitation to departing from entrenched ways of doing and thinking, some literature suggests. Since the current system determines the dominant ways of thinking, divergence from it will inevitably be accompanied with conflict.

Agonistic democrats – here represented by political theorist Chantal Mouffe – argue that repressing conflict mainly works to maintain the status quo. They contend that deliberative democracy mistakenly aims at rational consensus and thereby devalues the role of conflict in democratic politics. Mouffe (2009) argues that by postulating the availability of a public sphere that is not dictated by power and where a rational consensus could be reached, deliberative democrats misrepresent the ineradicable character of the pluralism of values that politics entails. She, therefore, refutes the possibility of a consensus without exclusion: “[c]onsensus in a liberal-democratic society is – and will always be – the expression of a hegemony and the crystallization of power relations” (Mouffe 2009, 49). While deliberative democracy emerged from a critique of the unequal distribution of power, the theory’s focus on reaching consensus may itself contribute to this issue.

Furthermore, the deliberative democratic focus on creating the ‘right’ kind of democratic actors and behaviours may be at the expense of promoting self-organisation by ordinary people (Lepori 2019). Humphrey (2007) further argues that the behavioural constraints that deliberative democrats place upon participants in debate (e.g. the requirements of mutual justification, listening, and respect) excludes radical actors and is, therefore, in the way of radical change. The agonistic model of democracy, rather than aiming to eliminate conflict and passions from the public sphere, holds that these are vital for a pluralist democracy (Mouffe 2009). Additionally, Krüger (2022, 8) argues that there are also exclusionary effects at the level of the negotiated content as “[d]eliberative decision-making relies on the stable framework of established institutional structures and is not designed to shift these fundamental parameters.” This would, of course, be problematic in the context of transformations.

Based on the agonistic critique, a perspective on the climate debate has developed that opposes the consensus-building perspective, which Pepermans and Maesele (2016) call the ‘critical debate perspective’. The latter takes issue with the depoliticisation of climate change (rather than its politicisation), which is understood as “the process in which the dominant approach to climate change is continuously represented as ‘the’ scientific or social consensus, while the values, interests, and assumptions which inform this representation remain concealed” (Pepermans and Maesele 2016, 480). Therefore, depoliticising approaches would hinder democratic debate about alternative societal arrangements beyond the global neoliberal market economy. Instead, there should be critical debate about the climate, which would involve “the recognition that society is contingent, that it can be understood and organized differently” (ibid., 483).

An example of this perspective is Machin (2020), who argues for ‘ecological agonism’ as an alternative to the dominant deliberative model. Such an approach not only acknowledges that there are irreducible disagreements around environmental issues and scientific knowledge claims, but understands these disagreements as fruitful and even crucial for a shift to more sustainable ways of living. From this point of view, conflict is necessary to disrupt unsustainable conventions: “If particular meanings, discourses, or practices have become entrenched, then their retrenchment is unlikely without robust critique and political realignments” (Machin 2020, 164-165). Perhaps, the transformation towards sustainability requires more conflictual approaches than deliberation.

Bächtiger et al. (2018, 18), however, claim that while these criticisms may have been relevant for the first generation of deliberative democratic theorists, they no longer

hold for the second generation, as they also stress pluralism and thereby embrace conflict. Deliberation that does not aim for consensus can still involve clarifying disagreement and striving for ‘metaconsensus’: “mutual recognition of the legitimacy of the different values, preferences, judgments, and discourses held by other participants” (Curato et al. 2017, 31).

Hammond (2020a), on the other hand, agrees that deliberation is indeed too often used as a system-reinforcing tool (which I will go further into in the discussion of mini-publics). However, she posits that deliberation has both constructive and disruptive dimensions, so that instances of deliberation fall on a spectrum between the two. Inspired by the uptake of deliberative practices by radical environmental movements, including Extinction Rebellion, Hammond (2020a, 227) offers a sketch of a distinctly critical and disruptive form of deliberation, which is “informally organized, fluid, radical, and foremost oriented toward altering the terms of politics itself.” Her work shows that deliberative democracy is not a static theory and that overly simplistic portrayals of what deliberation does should be eschewed. Rather, for the purpose of this thesis, we need a better understanding of how deliberative practices are used within citizens’ assemblies.

### Deliberative Mini-Publics: Transformative Spaces or Governance Tools?

A citizens’ assembly is a form of deliberative mini-public, which is often understood as the practical application of the deliberative ideals described above. The following half of the chapter moves the focus from the theory of deliberative democracy to actual forms of citizen participation. The purpose is to explore the transformative potential of climate assemblies. Before doing so, I will briefly introduce mini-publics in order to gain a better understanding of their purpose and nature.

#### What Are Deliberative Mini-Publics?

In order to engage citizens in political decision-making, many democratic theorists have turned to democratic innovations, which have also gained popularity among policymakers (Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä 2015, 1). An important subset within the broader domain of democratic innovations are deliberative mini-publics (or simply mini-publics), an umbrella term for a variety of processes that use deliberative methods and (near-)random selection of participants (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021). The most well-known are citizens’ juries or reference panels, planning cells, consensus conferences, citizens’ assemblies, deliberative polls, and G1000s. Smith and Setälä (2018, 300)

broadly characterise deliberative mini-publics as “institutions in which a diverse body of citizens is selected randomly to reason together about an issue of public concern.” The group of participating citizens is supposed to represent a broader public, hence the term ‘mini-public’. As such, they follow the suggestion by political theorist Robert Dahl (1989, 340) for a “mini-populus” of citizens randomly selected from the demos to deliberate on a specific issue and whose judgment can be seen as that of the demos itself.

Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä (2015, 1) define mini-publics as “forums, usually organised by policy-makers, where citizens representing different viewpoints are gathered together to deliberate on a particular issue in small-N groups.” This definition includes a number of important characteristics. First of all, mini-publics are usually organised or sponsored by more traditional institutions, such as ministries, legislatures, or municipal councils. They are mostly brought into life for policymakers to receive citizen input on a specific issue and therefore often get specific policy assignments rather than having open agendas (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021). As such, they fit with a broader trend that Warren (2009) has termed “governance-driven democratization”: the emergence of elite-led democratic processes in the domain of policy development and administration, usually communicated as ‘citizen participation’ or ‘public engagement’. A fitting illustration of this trend is the fact that the OECD Directorate for Public Governance holds that citizen participation in public decision-making can deliver better policies. The Directorate recently published a report that aims to “guide policy makers on good practices and options for institutionalising citizen deliberation” (OECD 2020, 3).

Second, the participating citizens bring a variety of viewpoints to the deliberations as the composition of the group is supposed to be demographically representative (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021). This kind of representation is usually attained through creating a stratified sample of the broader population (or if the group is large enough a random sample can work). To ensure that particular social groups are included quotas are assigned. The most common ones are for age, gender, geographical location, ethnicity, and social class, but there have also been cases that have included, for instance, attitudes toward climate change. The idea is that this kind of demographic representation “is likely to result in good representation of life experiences, perspectives, opinions, and values, increasing the cognitive diversity of the body, which in turn should strengthen the quality of deliberation” (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021, 8).

There is an ongoing debate about the virtue of different selection methods and the inclusion of minority social groups (Smith 2012, 96-97; Smith and Setälä 2018, 302).

While some hold that the selection procedure should remain as close to random sampling as possible so every citizen has an equal chance to be selected (e.g. Fishkin 2009), others argue that a ‘critical mass’ from marginalised groups (i.e. over-representation) is necessary to ensure that their perspectives are taken into account (e.g. James 2008). Although the exact methods of selection vary between different mini-publics, they all bring together a diverse group of citizens, arguably unlike elected bodies such as parliaments.

Third, beyond their function and composition, mini-publics are characterised by their use of a combination of learning and deliberation. Broadly speaking, this means that the group of citizens takes evidence from experts and stakeholders and takes part in independent and facilitated group discussions (Smith and Setälä 2018). As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, deliberation is a form of communication that “involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests regarding matters of common concern” (Bächtiger et al. 2018, 2). According to Lacelle-Webster and Warren (2021), organising high-quality deliberation during a mini-public requires a well-defined task or issue, sufficient time to learn about and address it, integration of knowledge from different types of actors (e.g. experts, advocates, and people with lived experience), and good facilitation of the discussions. The latter is seen as crucial to ensure that all voices are included, to avoid domination of the discussion, and ultimately to reach the considered judgment that theorists envision (Smith 2012, 98-100). Overall, the values that are emphasized throughout the deliberative process are “inclusive participation (...), mutual justification, listening, respect, reflection, and openness to persuasion” (Dryzek et al. 2019, 1145).

The different models of mini-publics differ in number of participants, duration of the process, and the form of output (Smith and Setälä 2018). Citizens’ assemblies are among the larger as well as longer processes and, therefore, are considered “most robust and elaborate” (OECD 2020, 36). They typically include more than 40 participants and last more than 2 weekends up to a year (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021, 3). During a citizens’ assembly, the group of citizens gets together on several occasions over an extended period of time to go through stages of learning about the topic, consulting experts and stakeholders, deliberating amongst each other, and finally deciding on a set of collective recommendations (most commonly by a majority vote) (OECD 2020).

Although deliberative mini-publics remain fairly uncommon, there is a lot of scholarship on them because of the prevalent conviction that they are among the most

promising democratic innovations (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021). As Grönlund, Bächtiger, and Setälä (2015, 3) state, “there is (...) much hope among theorists – and practitioners as well – that deliberative mini-publics contribute to the renewal of representative democracy.” In recent years, there has especially been attention for citizens’ assemblies that engage with topics related to climate change. To understand why, it is important to keep in mind the distinction that Smith and Setälä (2018) make between the internal and external face of mini-publics. With the former, they mean analysing mini-publics as institutions in themselves, including the quality of deliberation during the process, while the latter refers to their role within the larger political process. The following two sections will discuss both dimensions for climate assemblies.

#### A Protected Space to Talk about Climate Action...

It is the internal face of mini-publics that makes them so attractive to deliberative democrats as well as those concerned about climate action. As the participants should be representative of the population, the idea is that they bring with them the different views and conflicts that exist in society (Dryzek et al. 2019). Additionally, the process of mini-publics includes a strong educational component as participants listen to presentations by scientists, other experts, and people with lived experience. The design which combines citizen deliberation and consultation of experts, then, “[p]romise[s] political judgments that reflect both relevant information and the variety of arguments and perspectives” (Smith and Setälä 2018, 303). Mini-publics, therefore, aim to realize a combination of two democratic goods that are both highly valued in deliberative democratic theory: inclusiveness and considered judgment (Smith, 2012, 93). This combination is especially relevant for the climate debate as there is a need to integrate both scientific knowledge and social justice considerations in order to get to effective as well as politically feasible climate measures. Lacelle-Webster and Warren (2021, 9) argue that the long format of citizens’ assemblies, which gives participants time for discussions, makes them the most deliberative of deliberative mini-publics. Therefore, given the complex nature of the topic, this is also the preferable model of mini-public to address climate issues.

Furthermore, since the participants are randomly selected, the process is “decoupled from the strategic interests of electoral democracy, and insulated insofar as possible from vested interests and social inequalities, all of which tend to undermine deliberative ideals” (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021, 9). The fact that mini-publics engage lay citizens rather than professional politicians decouples the climate debate from party politics,



strategic interests, and the short timeframe of electoral cycles. Lobby by, for instance, oil companies is generally kept out of the process as to not influence its outcomes. Therefore, climate assemblies are understood as a protected space where citizens can talk about the climate action to be taken without the distortions found in parliamentary debate and the public sphere (Boswell et al. 2022). The hope is that they “can provide a challenge to the status quo, and ask the ‘difficult questions’ that might not be raised in the course of traditional policymaking dialogues and processes” (Willis et al. 2022, 9).

Dryzek et al. (2019) claim that empirical research mostly supports the claims that are made in deliberative democratic theory. These authors are optimistic about citizens’ capacity to engage in constructive dialogue, make sound decisions as a group, and even overcome existing polarization, especially when deliberative processes are effectively organised. Smith and Setälä (2018, 304) agree that, “[t]he current weight of findings strongly supports the claims of those who see mini-publics as a site of democratic deliberation.” For instance, research has shown that the deliberations can make people’s preferences more informed and reasoned (Fishkin 2009) and can increase participants’ understanding of arguments that oppose their own perspectives (Hansen and Andersen 2004). With regards to climate assemblies, the section linking deliberation to sustainability discussed the reasons to believe that deliberation leads to more environmentally-minded outcomes than other forms of decision-making. So far, these arguments seem to hold up in practice as “national climate assemblies have developed positions which are more ambitious, and a more comprehensive response to the climate crisis, than national governments” (Willis et al. 2022, 7).

There are also findings that go against the claims made by deliberative democrats. For instance, highly educated and politically interested people are often over-represented among the participants (as invitees are not obliged to participate), women and less educated participants talk less during discussions, and people can be persuaded by other factors than the quality of an argument (Smith and Setälä 2018, 305). Still, the academic literature is overall highly enthusiastic about the internal face of mini-publics and these negative findings are mostly understood as kinks to be ironed out. There is more contestation, however, when it comes to the external face of mini-publics, or the role they can or should play politically.

... or the Instrumentalization of Deliberation?

Smith (2012, 106) states that while “[m]ini-publics are celebrated for the manner in which they realize inclusiveness and considered judgement, (...) there is normally a failure to realize popular control in any strong sense.” The dominant perspective, in theory as well as practice, is indeed that their role should remain consultative, assuming that their outcomes will strongly influence decision-makers. Ambitious climate policy is often considered politically risky. Therefore, the promise of climate assemblies is that the recommendations of citizens “can provide the necessary cover for action and indicate the willingness of citizens to accept potentially controversial policy interventions [to politicians]” (Willis et al. 2022, 7). Furthermore, the outcomes of a deliberative process may empower climate movements and civil society organisations in their demands.

However, the assumption that governments will listen to recommendations made by citizens is problematic because in practice, the impact of mini-publics on policy has been modest (Smith and Setälä 2018). The possibility of instrumental, non-committed use by public authorities is probably the main reservation regarding mini-publics that one finds in the literature. Smith and Setälä (2018, 307) state that “[t]he Achilles heel of the current practice of mini-publics is the power that public authorities have to be selective (either strategically or inadvertently) in both establishing mini-publics and adopting their recommendations.” Therefore, Dryzek et al. (2019, 1146) warn us to remain cautious of governments or powerful lobby groups using deliberative moments “as symbolic cover for business as usual.” This is easily done when governments can cherry pick those outcomes of the deliberative process that fit their stance or goals. The lack of empowerment has been an issue in the recent surge of climate assemblies. Because of this, according to Boswell et al. (2022, 2), “[i]nitial enthusiasm about the transformative potential of climate assemblies is beginning to give way to more sober and contested assessments of what each process has achieved.”

There is also the danger of the deliberative process itself being assimilated to the broader political system in which they operate. In its most simple form, the problem is that “someone needs to make decisions about structure, content, and limits to the process, and such decisions risk cooptation, bias, and strategic manipulation” (Neblo 2015, 184). Deliberative processes must, therefore, remain accountable to the broader public by being open to public review and criticism. However, Neblo (2015) highlights that opening up the process also gives powerful strategic actors more of a chance to dominate the discussion about the mini-public or even to manipulate public opinion. There is a tension

here as these are exactly the kinds of actors whose influence mini-publics were supposed to counteract in the first place. An especially crucial issue for climate assemblies is that of framing of the deliberations. The remit of a citizens' assembly is typically set beforehand and outside of the control of participants, yet determines to a large degree the scope of what is being discussed (Elstub et al. 2021). Consequently, there have been proposals for more 'open' deliberative processes where participants themselves get to decide on the task and agenda (Ward et al. 2003).

To mitigate the risk of instrumental use by public authorities as well as the risk of undue influence on the deliberative process, most literature then points to the importance of “[c]lear, preestablished frameworks for integrating citizen's assembly recommendations into decision-making, as well as independent, transparent, and open processes” (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021, 16). Especially since the ‘systemic turn’ in the deliberative democracy literature, the focus has moved from the quality of deliberation within a mini-public, to their external, systemic qualities (Curato and Böker 2016). It is no longer assumed that a high-quality deliberative moment will also have a positive impact on the deliberative system as a whole. Here, it is important to go beyond the narrow idea of success as linear policy impact. Rather, “it is important to see climate assemblies as an intervention into a complex constellation of political and policy institutions” (Boswell et al. 2022, 2).

### Climate Assemblies and the Logic of Transformation: Doubts and Concerns

So far, I have talked about climate assemblies in relation to climate policy-making.

However, the transformations literature is clear about the need for more than improved policies. This section explores concerns regarding the relationship between climate assemblies and the logic of transformation.

First of all, to navigate transformations, a citizens' assembly would need to be able to support deliberation on fundamental changes, including a rethinking of underlying principles and core values. However, Kahane (2016, 6) worries that mini-publics do not offer a conducive space to recognize the systemic causes of the climate crisis, as they “tend to address parts of the system, or isolated dynamics, without a sufficient grasp of the broader whole.” Systems thinking teaches us that to create change we may need to look at the system as a whole rather than compartmentalising an issue into smaller, manageable problems, as is done in technocratic thinking (Meadows 2009). Drawing on systems thinking and design, Kahane (2016) argues that the design of mini-publics needs

to be improved in order to move away from thinking in linear, mechanistic terms and to allow participants to get a better understanding of system complexity. Related to this is the fact that the impact of a climate assembly itself is also often thought of in linear terms. The recommendations that come out of a climate assembly are mostly understood as the end of the process, which makes it seem like “the impetus is to resolve the issue once-and-for-all” (Boswell et al. 2022, 11). However, the transformations literature emphasizes that transformation is a continuous and open-ended process rather than an outcome out of a straightforward process.

More fundamentally, it has been argued that as long as citizens’ assemblies are used as a “one-shot injection into the policy process” (Boswell et al. 2022, 5) they do not change the political system in any structural way. Berglund and Schmidt (2020) analyse Extinction Rebellion’s demand for governments to be led by a citizens’ assembly on the climate and ecological crisis. They argue that even though the demand is based on a critique of representative democracy, “[a]n add-on, single-issue, once-only citizens’ assembly” (Berglund and Schmidt 2020, 70) would form a single exception to politics as usual, leaving the power relation in society unchanged. Therefore, “[Extinction Rebellion’s] assembly demand is designed to create radical climate policies and not to lastingly transform the way we do politics” (ibid., 60). Willis et al. (2022), on the other hand, contends that that would be too much to ask from a single institution. They further argue that, “DMPs [deliberative mini-publics] are not passive institutions that fail to raise questions about existing dynamics of power and the way in which interests shape political outcomes on climate policy” (Willis et al. 2022, 8-9). Therefore, although citizens’ assemblies themselves may not fundamentally alter the political system, they could serve as spaces where such change is debated.

However, much of the deliberative democracy literature is now devoted to the study and design of mini-publics, which may draw attention away from broader changes in the way we do politics, including the development of a deliberative political culture. Chambers (2009, 332-333) regrets that the deliberative democracy literature has abandoned the “largely inchoate and often unstructured mass public” in favour of the more controlled deliberation that takes place within mini-publics. The controlled nature of citizen participation in mini-publics may be further reinforced by a prioritisation of expertise over democratic debate (Blue 2015). Lafont (2019, 356) further argues that deliberative democracy should not forsake participation in exchange for improved quality of deliberation, claiming that “[t]he *only road* to better political outcomes is the long,

participatory road that is taken when citizens forge a collective political will by changing one another's hearts and minds. Commitment to democracy simply *is* the realization that there are no shortcuts.” From this perspective, deliberative democracy will have to be realised not as a particular set of institutions but rather as a certain political culture, which most evolve gradually and bottom-up (Böker 2017). Transformation in the sense of society-wide change will, therefore, not be realised by an isolated deliberative process.

Furthermore, transformation requires disruption of the status quo, which comes from outside of the established powers. Citizens’ assemblies, however, are normally initiated by governments. Arguably, this ultimately makes them instruments of governments rather than spaces of contestation by citizens, which may diminish their critical potential. Here, Hammond’s (2021a) conceptual distinction between empowerment and activation is helpful. The former is the case when a previously marginalised group improves their ability to challenge power. Activation, on the other hand, can be characterised as “an elite-led engineering of citizen engagement” (Hammond 2021a, 174), which pacifies democratic demands. She argues that most democratic innovations are a form of mere citizen activation as powerful political and economic actors use participatory processes to engage citizens where it helps to fulfil specific purposes. Such ‘activated’ (rather than self-motivated) citizen involvement may actually perpetuate the given order – “dissolving its emancipatory force *precisely by seemingly endorsing it*” (ibid., 180).

Because of this status of citizen activation, Böker (2017) argues that mini-publics actually cannot fulfil the deliberative democratic standard of legitimacy. Since the deliberative ideal of justification can never be fully attained in practice, the justificatory process should always be ongoing and remain open-ended. For citizens to be critical of authority in this sense implies, in the first place, that they render it contestable; a kind of critical attitude that cannot be artificially engineered with the right institutional design. To fulfil the deliberative democratic standard of legitimacy, mini-publics would therefore “have to be an emancipatory instrument available to citizens rather than authorities, enabling them to *interrupt* rather than respond to rule, and to open up new debate in an independent manner through critical demands for justification” (Böker 2017, 30). Deliberation within mini-publics may not be suitable for contesting power structures.

Most pessimist about the transformative potential of climate assemblies is Blühdorn (2013, 17) who sees democratic innovations like these as tools to sustain unsustainability: “democratic values and the innovative modes of decentralised, participatory government which, up to the present, are widely hailed as the key towards a genuinely legitimate,

effective and efficient environmental policy are metamorphosing into tools for managing the condition of sustained ecological and social unsustainability.” According to him, these forms of participation are a form of mere simulation, especially as they coincide with a techno-managerial reframing of environmental issues through the paradigm of ecological modernisation. In this view, climate assemblies are part of a larger movement towards the depoliticisation of environmental politics.

However, this view is nuanced by Boswell et al. (2022) whose empirical analysis of six climate assemblies found that they operated with different degrees of politicisation, which suggests that mini-publics are not inherently depoliticising. The ambiguity surrounding mini-publics’ critical, transformative, and emancipatory potential is also emphasized by other authors. According to Hammond (2021a, 176), determining the promise of democratic innovations is difficult because they “have the simultaneous potential to be either empowering or activating.” As mentioned earlier, elsewhere she has conceptualised deliberation as containing both a constructive and a disruptive dimension (Hammond 2020a). This suggests that the concerns discussed in this section do not necessarily mean that we have to give up on mini-publics altogether. As Böker and Elstub (2015, 137) argue, experimentation with new forms of mini-publics could lead to “the right balance between controlled design and a more open, critical role.” Therefore, there is a need for more critical research into the practice and possibilities of climate assemblies.

## 4. Methods

So far, chapter 2 has provided theoretical background on transformations towards sustainability. Based on this, I assume there is a need for democratic spaces where political contention over different transformation pathways can play out. In chapter 3, I discussed reasons why deliberative spaces like citizens' assemblies could potentially fulfil that role, as well as doubts and concerns. The current chapter serves as a transition from the background of the thesis to my own analytical contribution as I aim to clarify and justify the logic of how I went about answering the research question. The first section about case study design and the second section on data and methods describe the empirical research I did for chapter 5. The final section continues the discussion on taking a critical approach to environmental politics started in the introduction and describes the rationale behind chapter 6.

### Case Study Design

In chapter 5, I analyse two case studies as a way to critically examine the transformative capacity of real-world climate assemblies. This choice is in line with Yin's (2014) justification for the use of case studies. He argues that "the distinctive need for case study research arises out of the desire to understand complex social phenomena" (Yin 2014, 4). Similarly, Simons (2020) holds that the rationale for doing case study research is the wish to understand and represent the complexity of real situations. This corresponds well with the nature of sustainability transformations as ambiguous, open-ended, and contested, thereby defying clear-cut answers or one-size-fits-all solutions. It is not possible to lay out a blueprint of a transformative political process to then evaluate real-world examples against. Rather, I am interested in the tensions and trade-offs involved in democratic processes that respond to the climate crisis. The in-depth nature of a case study allows me to explore just that. Since case study research allows the researcher to gain specific knowledge while retaining a holistic perspective (Yin 2014), this seemed to be the most fitting approach for my research interest.

Case study research is not defined by a particular methodology or restricted to specific methods (Simons 2020). In fact, a unique strength of case study research over other forms of social science research (including experiments, surveys, histories, and statistical analyses) is the possibility to incorporate a variety of evidence, including documents, artefacts, interviews, and observations (Yin 2014). Therefore, a case study

can be defined – in simple terms – as, “a method involving systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event, or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions” (Berg 2008, 283). Yin (2014) suggests that a multiple-case study is often preferable over a single case study because it leads to more compelling evidence, making the overall study more robust. However, the benefits of adding another case to the study must be balanced against time and resources. Keeping this in mind, I decided on two cases because it opens up the possibility for comparing and contrasting findings while still allowing for in-depth analysis in the time allotted to a master’s thesis.

It is of particular importance to be clear about the unit of analysis, i.e. defining the boundaries of the object of interest, including start-and-stop dates (Robinson and Seale 2018). In this thesis, the cases are the Irish *Citizens’ Assembly* (ICA), whose sessions on national climate policy took place in the fall of 2017, and the French *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (CCC), which ran from October 2019 to June 2020. I will analyse the design and organisation of these participatory processes and what took place during the sessions. The period that led up to the process and the political impact it had after it ended are important to understand the context in which the citizens’ assemblies took place but – strictly speaking – fall outside of the unit of analysis.

Additionally, it needs to be thought through what the case is a case of (Simons 2020). A single case can be understood as an instance of some universe of phenomena that can be called the ‘class’ (George and Bennett 2005). The ICA and the CCC are instances of the class of climate assemblies, i.e. citizens’ assemblies that deal with one or more aspects of the climate change challenge. However, Thomas and Myers (2015) point out that the case inquirer needs to do more than merely identify a set of similar instances. Rather, a case study needs an analytical frame, which makes the case more than simply an instance of a class. They distinguish between the subject and the object of a study, where the former is the practical, historical unity (the ICA, the CCC) and the latter is the analytical category or theory through which the subject is viewed and which the subject exemplifies and illuminates. The object can be defined at the outset or emerge throughout the process but in either case it “crystallizes, thickens or develops as the study proceeds” (Thomas and Myers 2015, 57) and should remain dynamic as the researcher keeps considering the nature of what is being studied. In this thesis, I initially understood the object to simply be climate assemblies but it ended up being closer to *democratic spaces where political contention over transformation pathways plays out*. The ICA and CCC,



therefore, serve as “the prism through which ‘facts and concepts, reality and hypotheses’ about [navigating sustainability transformations] were refracted, viewed and studied” (Thomas and Myers 2015, 58).

A limitation of case study research that is often brought up is that it is impossible to generalize from one or a few cases. Although that is also not the goal of case study research, I, indeed, cannot claim that my findings about the ICA and the CCC also apply to all other climate assemblies. However, the results can be understood as informative beyond these two cases. Here it is important to differentiate between statistical and analytical generalization (Yin 2014). The former concerns extrapolating probabilities from a sample to a population, which is not possible in case study research. The latter involves developing or expanding theory, which is often an aim for case inquirers. In qualitative case study research, as Simons (2020, 15) argues, inferences arise “from a process of interpretation in context.” The particularity of a case can be used to support, contest, refine, or elaborate concepts or theoretical propositions (Schwandt 2007). In this thesis, the tensions and shortcomings found in the cases formed the starting point for further theorizing in chapter 6. The creative thinking of that chapter was prompted by an in-depth understanding of the two cases, yet clearly extends beyond them. I will further discuss my thinking behind this part in the final section but first I will describe how I went about studying the two cases.

### Data and Methods

During the research for chapter 5, I have engaged in a combination of qualitative desk-based and secondary research. The former is a form of empirical research where data is gathered indirectly (i.e. without direct contact with people), for example via the internet (Bassot 2022). Secondary research, on the other hand, involves using data from previous studies and interpreting it through one’s own research questions. When I first started working on this thesis, I wanted to study a citizens’ assembly (in the Netherlands, where I’m from) that had yet to take place, so that I could observe the process as it played out. However, due to the Covid-pandemic the citizens’ assembly kept being pushed forward and eventually I decided to study two citizens’ assemblies that had already finished.

To study the cases, I have collected and used a range of documents produced in relation to the ICA and CCC. The term ‘documents’ includes a variety of sources that can be read, have not been produced for a research purpose, and are preserved and made available in some way so that they can be studied (Bryman 2016). I have read and

analysed the citizens' assemblies' public websites, final reports, agendas and facilitator guidelines, as well as letters by government officials and legislative texts that were produced in relation to initiating the ICA and CCC. In the reference list, there is a section for primary sources, where I have listed all documents cited in the thesis. I used the software DeepL Translator to translate French documents into English, though I checked, and if necessary corrected, all quotes used in the text.

The texts used are all considered official documents (as opposed to personal documents). It is necessary to acknowledge that these documents are socially produced – rather than being a transparent representation of reality – and ask questions about the form, function, and implied readership of these texts (Gidley 2018). For instance, the final report of the ICA serves to document the process for public transparency's sake but also serves a political purpose. In the introduction to the report, the appointed Chairperson not only gives an overview of the sessions but also “urge[s] the members of the Oireachtas [Parliament] to view [the participants'] recommendations with the respect and due consideration that they deserve” (ICA 2018, 4). This example shows that documents cannot be understood as depictions of reality but need to be interpreted by the researcher.

I did a thematic analysis (also referred to as qualitative content analysis) of the documents, meaning I searched for underlying themes in the materials (Bryman 2016). Using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo allowed me to keep an overview of the various documents used and draw connections between them. I used a combination of deductive and inductive coding so some of the themes were developed before analysis and others emerged from the data (Rivas 2018). Based on a review of the literature on climate assemblies, there were some broad topics I was interested in beforehand, for instance questions of power and expertise. However, during the analysis, I also found many issues I had not thought of before reading the documents.

Additionally, since I was not able to observe the citizens' assemblies myself, I have relied on the observations and judgments (published in academic studies) by researchers that were present during the process or closely connected to it in other ways. In both the ICA and CCC, the organisers gave permission to a group of researchers to be present during the sessions, which led to several published studies. I have relied on these most for the CCC because its final report did not provide as many details about the process as the ICA report did. Because my research question provided a different focus from other academic studies, I still gained new insights and interpretations using this secondary data (Bassot 2022). However, since the data was collected for a different

research interest, I might have picked up different things had I observed the process myself.

Ideally, the perspectives of the organisers (as represented by the documents they produced) and of observing researchers would have been supplemented with the perspective of participating citizens. This could have been done through interviews that aimed to uncover how the design of the two citizens' assemblies was experienced by the participants. I have not done this for a few reasons. In the case of the CCC, the participating citizens had the right to remain anonymous. Some of them decided to disclose their identity in order to speak out about the process – for instance, on social media – but only being able to talk to the most vocal of participants would have given a skewed image of the process. In the case of the ICA, the list of participants was openly available but since the sessions took place four years before I started writing this thesis, I was unsure that they would have remembered the process in enough detail for it to be useful in this project. Finally, and most importantly, having limited time to execute the research simply forced me to make decisions. Instead of doing interviews, I have taken extra care to include responses and behaviours by participants as described by the attending researchers.

### From Critique to Imagination

As discussed in the introduction to the thesis, critical environmental scholarship aims to unsettle the unsustainable status quo. Additionally, there is a need to transcend the current order by envisioning alternatives (Hammond 2021b). Therefore, in chapter 6, I move from critique to imagination, as I challenge myself to imagine what citizens' assemblies could be like, beyond the ways they are currently used by governments. While chapter 5 is mainly critical in its outlook, chapter 6 is supposed to be more constructive as it aims to move the climate assembly model forward. I take the current practice of climate assemblies – as exemplified by the ICA and CCC – as my starting point. Based on the tensions and shortcomings found in the analysis in chapter 5, I then recast the purpose of climate assemblies to revolve around opening up alternatives in order to be more in line with the logic of sustainability transformations and I outline different routes that could be taken within a climate assembly that align with this redefined purpose. Throughout, I have tried to keep the connection with reality by including practical examples.

This is in line with what Wright (2010) calls 'real utopias'. In chapter 2, I noted that his theory of emancipatory social transformation emphasizes the crucial role of the

imagination as alternatives need to be envisioned to create political will. However, in order to inform practical strategies for transformation it is important that utopian ideals are more than vague fantasies. In this vein, real utopias straddle the tension between dreams and practice: they are “utopian ideals that are grounded in the real potentials of humanity, utopian destinations that have accessible waystations, utopian designs of institutions that can inform our practical tasks of navigating a world of imperfect conditions for social change” (Wright 2010, 6). His work, like mine, is part empirical, part speculative, which leads to a sense of optimism and possibility grounded in understanding. Applying this logic to the politics of sustainability transformations, chapter 6 contributes to the large task of “[extending] the realm of the possible for environmental politics” (Lövbrand et al. 2015, 212) through the more modest aim of extending – albeit slightly – what is possible within climate assemblies.

## 5. The Transformative Capacity of Current Climate Assemblies

Chapter 2 discussed that deliberate transformations towards sustainability depend on the capacity of societies to actively change which involves a conscious rethinking and remaking of systems and structures that are deemed inadequate in the face of the climate and ecological crisis. Therefore, we need careful yet bold democratic debate on the possible responses to the crisis as well as collective capacity to imagine alternative pathways to current, unsustainable ways of living. This is not an easy task, to say the least. It has even been argued that, “[t]aking a stand, or making decisions about what is the right thing to do in relation to climate change will involve one of the most important and complex decisions any generation has ever had to face” (Russell 2010, 55). Furthermore, such decisions need to be made in the face of uncertainty and change and are, therefore, better characterised as a continuous process of transformation rather than one-time decisions.

As discussed in chapter 3, proponents of deliberative democracy argue that this talk-based form of democracy allows for a questioning and rethinking of established values through genuine deliberation that is open-ended and focussed on the common good rather than on private, corporate, or political interests. Citizens’ assemblies – when understood as a practical application of these ideals – therefore may be able to overcome some of the barriers to transformation that plague prevailing climate politics (see chapter 2). This makes them relevant as potential forums for collective reflection on and debate about transformative pathways. However, many concerns about the transformative capacity of climate assemblies remain.

In order to get a better understanding of the practice of climate assemblies, this chapter analyses two of them: the Irish Citizens’ Assembly (ICA) and the Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat (CCC). Ultimately, the question this chapter aims to answer is: *To what extent did the design of the ICA and CCC facilitate the rethinking of unsustainable systems, structures, and practices?* My focus is in the first place on the internal face of climate assemblies, i.e. the way in which they are organised. Before going into the cases, I will first consider what it would mean for a climate assembly to be in line with the logic of transformation and which factors are of importance in this regard. These critical features then form the framework for the analysis of the ICA and the CCC.

## Conceptualising the Transformative Capacity of Climate Assemblies

The extent to which citizens' assemblies on climate facilitate the rethinking of unsustainable systems, structures, and practices is what I will refer to as their *transformative capacity*. In chapter 3, I explored how the relationship between deliberation and the logic of transformation is discussed in the literature on deliberative democracy and mini-publics. Now, how does one evaluate and compare the transformative capacity of actual climate assemblies? Here, I build on the work of Böker and Elstub (2015) who are concerned with the emancipation and critique that is possible through deliberative mini-publics. They identify three indicators of mini-publics that are relevant "in terms of their realising (or undermining) the critical dimension of deliberative democracy" (Böker and Elstub 2015, 132). According to them, the factors that contribute to mini-publics' critical or uncritical roles are representativeness, citizen control over the process, and decision-making impacts. I argue that these indicators are also relevant for the transformative capacity of climate assemblies.

First, representativeness or inclusiveness (which is the term I will be using) in citizens' assemblies is, first of all, important as a democratic good. One of the most appealing aspects of citizens' assemblies is that they bring together a demographically representative group of people so that the interests of all parts of society, not just elites, are represented. With regards to transformative capacity, inclusiveness mainly refers to the inclusion of different views and perspectives on various transformative pathways. Since change needs to be society-wide, spaces where contention over different pathways plays out should include a diversity of actors and stances. Therefore, what matters is not only the composition of the group of participants but also of the speakers as well as the presence of different forms of communication.

Second, citizen control over the process determines the extent to which participants can express their own concerns (Böker and Elstub 2015). Transformation requires disruption of the status quo and established ways of thinking. According to Landemore (2020, 42), "what citizens mostly bring to political decision-making is the ability to open or re-open questions closed or seen as closed by professional politicians and experts." Therefore, for climate assemblies to contribute to transformation, they need to offer citizens a space to do so, rather than being solely controlled by governments. Citizen control can be constrained by authorities who decide on the agenda or organisers who frame the deliberations, among other things.

Third, decision-making impacts matter because critique is only effective when it is consequential. In the analysis, I do not aim to determine the effect of the ICA and CCC on transformation in the respective countries as this is beyond the scope of the thesis (and may even be impossible to determine as they may have indirect effects). Rather, I am concerned with climate assemblies as forums for critique, debate, reflection, and imagination regarding transformations. It could be that they fulfil that role effectively without directly affecting policies. However, non-committed use by public authorities “might appear to cement the sponsoring authorities’ control over such processes more than representing an instance of challenging them” (Böker and Elstub 2015, 133). Therefore, to understand the transformative capacity of climate assemblies it is still important to look at how the recommendations by citizens are integrated into the broader decision-making process.

Besides these three categories proposed by Böker and Elstub (2015), I will cover three other issues that I argue – based on chapters 2 and 3 – impact the transformative capacity of climate assemblies. First, a citizens’ assembly can only facilitate a genuine rethinking of unsustainability when its programme allows for meaningful deliberation, i.e. “mutual communication that involves weighing and reflecting on preferences, values, and interests” (Bächtiger et al. 2018, 2). This is a more basic but equally crucial requirement: when there is simply not enough time or space for participants to discuss the issues at hand, their recommendations will inevitably remain superficial. Furthermore, for the arguments that link deliberation to sustainability (see chapter 3) to apply to citizens’ assemblies, facilitating meaningful deliberation needs to be a central goal (as opposed to, for instance, collecting input or measuring opinions).

Additionally, a transformative response to the climate crisis is only possible with a critical and systemic understanding of what that crisis entails. The literature on transformations emphasizes that the underlying causes of climate change are structural (see chapter 2). In other words, what will not suffice is a political response that addresses climate change only as a technological or governance challenge to be solved within the framework of the existing capitalist global economy. To understand the transformative capacity of climate assemblies we, therefore, need to look at how the climate crisis is framed throughout the process. In a citizens’ assembly process, the way that the problem to be addressed is understood plays out in the task that participants receive, the framing of discussions, and which topics are covered by speakers, among other things.

Finally, there is the question of pluralism and dissent, which I discussed in chapter 3 as the critique of deliberative democracy brought forward by agonistic democrats. In short, conflict may be necessary to disrupt entrenched ways of doing and depoliticisation mainly works to maintain the status quo. Therefore, when citizens' assemblies are overly focused on consensus-building and constructive dialogue, thereby removing the possibility for disruption, this may get in the way of the possibility for critical debate. In other words, pluralism and dissent are necessary ingredients for active political spaces that 'open up' rather than 'close down' alternative pathways (Stirling 2014).

This gives us the following six qualities that help to determine whether a citizens' assembly provided a space for rethinking unsustainability (in the order in which they will be discussed in the chapter):

1. The facilitation of meaningful deliberation
2. A systemic understanding of the climate crisis
3. Inclusiveness of perspectives
4. Citizen control over the process
5. Space for pluralism and dissent
6. Impact on decision-making

It should be noted that these do not necessarily describe the quality of the outcomes of a climate assembly. I will also not evaluate the recommendations that citizens developed.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I am interested in how the design and organisation affects what is possible within a climate assembly. These qualities could, therefore, be seen as the conditions that need to be met in order for climate assemblies to be able to play the critical and reflexive role that some theorists of deliberative democracy imagine for them. The remainder of the chapter will discuss how these categories played out in the case of the ICA and the CCC.

### The Facilitation of Meaningful Deliberation

A minimal requirement for a citizens' assembly to be able to rethink unsustainable systems and practices is that its format allows for meaningful deliberation. Citizens' assemblies are the most deliberative of all mini-publics because of their "longer durations enabling more learning and deeper deliberation" (Lacelle-Webster and Warren 2021, 3). The quality of deliberation is, therefore, first of all related to the duration of the assembly

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<sup>3</sup> See Denz (2021) for a master's thesis that evaluates the measures proposed by the CCC against degrowth criteria.



as participants need “time to learn about, and address, the issues” (ibid., 9). After covering this, I will discuss to what extent the type of activities and the format of discussions made meaningful deliberation possible.

The ICA's work on climate was severely limited by time constraints. As mentioned before, the ICA was not really a climate assembly but rather a citizens' assembly that took on several topics over the course of eleven weekends between 2016 and 2018. Besides climate change, the ICA deliberated on the abortion law, an ageing population, referenda, and fixed term parliaments. The deliberations on climate change received two weekends (of 1.5 days each) in the fall of 2017. Initially, the topic of climate change would be discussed last and in only one weekend. However, the participants decided to move it forwards and to dedicate a second weekend to it, which according to the Chairperson clearly demonstrated “[t]he Members’ [participants] interest in the topic” (ICA 2018, 1).

Still, two weekends are not enough for a thorough discussion of an issue as complex and broad as climate change. This is expressed, perhaps somewhat euphemistically, in the final report, which states that “[d]eveloping a comprehensive work programme, which took account of the key issues raised in the submissions, the views of the Members and the advice of the Expert Advisory Group presented a significant challenge” (ICA 2018, 60). It is not surprising that something that will impact almost all aspects of our lives proved difficult to be covered in four days. As Mulvad and Popp-Madsen (2021, 91) note, “‘climate change’ is not really one problem but rather a bundle of connected problematics that touch upon virtually all aspects of the set-up of society”. A single citizen’s assembly of this length cannot go into all of these aspects. Therefore, they hold that “the extremely limited scope of deliberations in the Irish case (...) arguably provides the biggest weakness or indeed flaw of its design” (ibid., 91).

The fact that the ICA spent only two weekends on climate change points to a lack of sense of urgency within the Irish government, as other topics received more time. For comparison, the famous work on abortion, which led to its legalisation through a referendum, was done during five weekends. This gave the participants significantly more time to carefully discuss the issue and come to well-considered recommendations. According to Rovers (2022), the success story of abortion obscures those Irish citizens’ assemblies that led to less (or no) political succession. The time spent on different topics certainly plays a part in this divergence of success.

The CCC, on the other hand, took place during 7 weekends (of 2.5 days each) and ran over the course of 9 months (3 October 2019 – 21 June 2020). This makes it the longest-lasting climate assembly to date (Giraudet et al. 2022, 2). Interestingly enough, the CCC was initially planned to consist of 6 sessions but, like the ICA, participating citizens requested an additional session (ibid., 6). The CCC, thus, had a significantly longer duration than the ICA, which allowed for more meaningful deliberation among its participants. The longer duration is clearly reflected in the output of the two citizens' assemblies- Although the number of recommendations does not necessarily inform us about the quality of deliberation, in this case, it is certainly telling. While the final product of the ICA was a set of 13 recommendations, the CCC produced 149 proposed measures.

Still, some say that the CCC was also limited by time constraints. Eymard (2020, 139), who was part of the team of scientists that answered citizens' questions throughout the process, states that, “[f]act-checking was too often fast-checking!” While the team aimed to answer citizens quickly to allow them to continue their discussions, responses to complex questions were sometimes only completed after the relevant session had ended. The nature of the topic, therefore, seems to make the requirement of sufficient time even more profound as knowledge about climate change is often highly complex.

Besides duration, citizens' assemblies can be more or less conducive to meaningful and critical deliberation based on the activities and format of discussions. As Böker and Elstub (2015, 135) state, “short and clearly delineated activities constrain the space for critique, for instance by inviting views only on very specific questions and in specific forms”. The ICA is a fitting example here. Its programme before the voting stage consisted of presentations by invited speakers, some panel discussions between speakers, plenary Q&A sessions, and smaller roundtable discussions between participating citizens (ICA 2017a; ICA 2017b). The learning and deliberation phase were not separated, as is the case in some citizens' assemblies. Instead, the citizen discussions were scheduled in between presentations, so that participants could discuss a topic right after they had gotten information about it from an expert. This design, therefore, gives priority to discussing the ideas and proposals from experts over citizens bringing their own ideas to the table. This is also reflected in the recommendations the participants eventually voted on as these mostly correspond with the content of the expert presentations (ICA 2018).

Furthermore, the time spent on each of these activities is telling. While the presentations by experts took a total of 385 minutes, the Q&A sessions (some of which included panel discussions between speakers) took 330 minutes, and the roundtable

discussions between citizens received least time with 270 minutes (ICA 2017a; ICA 2017b). Thus, at least in terms of time, the programme of the ICA privileged expert knowledge over citizen deliberation. Blue (2015, 152) warns that, “[t]he admirable objective to include lay publics in climate policy can be limited in practice by a tendency to frame climate change as an inherently expert-based issue.” Such a tendency was certainly present in the programme of the ICA, which gave citizens little opportunity for meaningful deliberation on the climate action their country should be taking.

The format of the CCC allowed for much more in-depth discussion, mainly because there was much more time available, but also because the CCC used a different format for citizen discussions. During the first session, citizens were assigned to one out of five thematic groups, to which they returned several times throughout sessions two to six. Each group went through a process of exploring their theme, identifying paths of action, determining priorities, developing measures and the argumentation for them, and finally, presenting their proposal to the rest of the group (CCC (b)). Within the thematic groups, citizens had considerable freedom to structure the discussions, request information and decide their focus. According to Böker and Elstub (2015, 135), “[t]he more flexible and thorough the activities, the more power the participants have to use the mini-public to express their own views in their own way.” Therefore, the longer deliberations in thematic groups allowed for more meaningful deliberation than the short and fragmented discussions of the ICA.

However, a downside of this format is the lack of opportunity for transverse discussions between the different themes. About this, CCC fact-checker Eymard (2020, 139) notes that, “[i]t was therefore not possible to check the robustness of the proposed measures with respect to all objectives.” As each group developed the recommendations on their theme, the different clusters of recommendations were produced somewhat in isolation from each other. Here, the example of the work done by the thematic group on consumption is telling. Mellier (2021), who attended and observed the CCC as an accredited researcher, outlines the process through which the citizens who were a part of this thematic group created their measures. Already during the first session, the group raised some concerns regarding the process. One of them was that “they wondered whether they would be able to suggest topics which were not part of the 5 themes, or other subjects such as degrowth” (Mellier 2021, 57). The thematic groups, to a certain extent, forced participants to stay on topic, which some may have experienced as restricting.

Furthermore, Mellier's (2021) observations show that the format constrained the depth of discussion that was possible. During the third session, the group expressed topics that needed to be further explored, among which they identified 'Change of the economic system'. She also observed that several citizens were grappling with more systemic drivers of consumption. However, the design of the process prevented them from having structured discussions about such questions. Mellier (2021, 58) concludes that "the process did not always support deeper deliberation on lifestyle change (i.e., the systemic conditions that shape how we live) and the implications for the economic models of development (e.g., growth vs. degrowth agenda)." Krüger's (2022) criticism that deliberative processes are only able to deal with narrow, predefined issues rings true here.

In other words, the lack of possibility for transverse discussion and questioning of underlying structures points to a deeper issue in citizens' assemblies regarding negotiable content. In light of the systemic change that is required for transformations towards sustainability, these limitations are problematic. Still, the Consumption group was able to rethink current consumption patterns. For instance, one of their proposals to reduce over-consumption was to regulate advertising, which has been called "perhaps one of the most innovative of the Convention" (Mellier 2021, 60), and could certainly be seen as a change in a fundamental aspect of society (i.e. consumerism).

To conclude, the ICA, with its short duration and focus on input from experts, did not allow for much meaningful citizen deliberation. The CCC, with its longer duration and deliberation within thematic groups, fared much better in this regard. However, the observations from the researchers that were present still show that there were some limitations when it came to issues that did not fit within the discussion format as decided on by the organisers. This first theme of meaningful deliberation raises important questions regarding expertise and negotiable content that will be taken up further in the following sections.

### A Systemic Understanding of the Climate Crisis

Climate assemblies, by definition, posit climate change as a problem that requires a response. What that response will be partially depends on how the problem is framed and understood, by the organizers of the process as well as by participants. This is true for any topic but perhaps even more significant for deliberations on climate change due to the complexities and uncertainties related to it. Climate change is not simply a singular,

biophysical phenomenon that exists out there in the world so that we can objectively observe and describe it. Rather it is “simultaneously a reality, an agenda, a problem and a context” (Brace and Geoghegan 2011, 285). Due to the breadth and complexity of the climate crisis, decisions regarding focus must be made to keep the discussions manageable. Elstub et al. (2021) have argued that this exacerbates problems of power and the unequal nature of agenda-setting. In this section, I will therefore look at how the organisers of the ICA and the CCC framed the climate crisis since “[t]he way we understand and respond to climate change is intimately entangled with the ways in which it is framed” (Blue 2016, 78). In this, I will focus on the remit and the choice of sub-topics. The former defines the problem to be addressed, while the latter defines the areas where possible solutions can be found. Together they largely determined the direction that deliberations could take.

The first thing to consider is the remit of the citizens’ assemblies, which is often formulated as a question to be answered by the participating citizens at the end of the process. In the case of the ICA and the CCC, the tasks that the citizens received were worded quite differently, which will have influenced the rest of the process since “the scope of a citizens’ assembly will determine many of the design features” (Elstub et al. 2021, 3). As mentioned before, the ICA was created to make recommendations on five different issues. The remit for the sessions on climate change was “How the State can make Ireland a Leader in tackling Climate Change” (ICA 2018, 1). The phrasing around leadership is remarkable because of Ireland’s reputation as a “climate laggard” (Devaney et al. 2020b). Civil society groups have used this term to criticize the lack of Irish climate action progress. The annual Climate Change Performance Index repeatedly ranked Ireland as the worst performing EU member state and in 2017 – the year that the Citizens’ Assembly took place – Ireland’s per capita CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of 13.3 tonnes were the third highest in the EU (with the average being 8.8 tonnes) (Devaney et al. 2020b). Seeing that Ireland was not even close to being a leader at the time, one may have expected a more open-ended phrasing (which was also used for the other issues considered by the ICA).

However, it could be argued that this remit did allow for ambitious climate proposals. The focus on leadership shaped the presentations that were given by experts. With regards to different sectors, the first speaker focused on the current state of a sector and the government’s policies, while “[t]he second speaker at each session was then asked to consider ‘if Ireland was a leader in tackling climate change, what would this sector look like’” (ICA 2018, 61). The organisation also invited speakers from other

countries, such as Denmark and Scotland, to talk about the innovations and successful examples in their context that Ireland can draw inspiration from. The leadership approach adds an element of competition to climate action and frames it as an international effort, to which countries contribute to a greater or lesser degree, and which requires innovative countries to lead the way.

Something else that stands out in the wording of the remit is its focus on the state. Citizen deliberation as “a policy tool at the disposal of authorities” (Hammond 2020a, 224) was made very explicit here. The ICA framed climate change as a problem that requires state action, rather than, for instance, cultural or behavioural change. On the one hand, this focus on the state is in line with the mandate that the ICA received, which was to make recommendations to the Houses of the Oireachtas, the Irish parliament. On the other hand, the remit restricts climate action as the territory of the state. By presupposing, from the outset, that solutions are to be found at the state-level, other actors and levels of society are excluded from the discussion. This is not simply a semantic question as the remit influenced the direction that deliberations could take as well as the shape that the outcomes of the process could have. For instance, an explanation of the voting procedures in the final report states that “[t]he questions on this Ballot Paper were very much framed as statements on what the State should do to achieve a leadership role for Ireland” (ICA 2018, 13).

The remit of the CCC was quite different from that of the ICA. In the letter that formally established the CCC, the French Prime Minister stated that participants would be asked “to define structuring measures to achieve, in a spirit of social justice, a reduction of greenhouse gas emissions of at least 40% by 2030 compared to 1990” (Philippe 2019). The 40% goal is in line with the intended nationally determined contribution that France had set as part of the Paris Agreement, while the inclusion of social justice in the task is a response to the Yellow Vests movement (Giraudet et al. 2022, 4). Also note that the remit only includes mitigation not adaptation measures. The ICA, on the other hand, aimed to include both.

The fact that this remit includes a goal in the form of a percentage and a year is in line with the target-oriented approach that is the centre of most climate politics. Such an approach portrays the challenge as a technical one and as such, it risks becoming overly managerial and losing out of sight “the contestations, deeper value discussions, and alternative worldviews” (Hammond 2021b, 286). Meadows (2009) has also argued that when the aim is to change the structure of a system, the usual attention for numbers and

parameters is not very effective as this may lead to minor changes that leave intact the overall workings of the system. The focus on numerical targets translated into the CCC process as the Support Group, who provided technical background, assessed the impact of proposed measures on the reduction of GHG emissions by giving them 1 to 3 stars (CCC 2021a, 10). However, what is interesting is that participants still proposed several measures that have no direct impact or whose impact is not measurable, such as strengthening environmental education and including the preservation of the environment in article 1 of the Constitution. In that sense, citizens did not let themselves be fully guided by the remit.

The remit also transcends the target-oriented approach by including that measures need to be developed “in a spirit of social justice”, rather than for instance a concern with cost effectiveness or efficiency. As such, it frames climate change as a justice issue. This approach is a break from France’s climate policymaking at the time. The Yellow Vests protests started because of environmental policies that people understood to be unfairly affecting lower incomes and rural areas (Grossman 2019). This context gave the CCC the opportunity to discuss not only sustainability but also socio-economic inequality. It acknowledges that climate change, as well as measures that aim to reduce it, impact people differently. Furthermore, Fazey et al. (2018, 205) argue that considering social justice can enhance agency and thereby assist transformation because it “can provide both a strong intrinsic motivation for change while also helping to focus on how existing conditions undermine the potential of individuals, communities and societies to be actively involved in shaping transformative processes.” The remit, therefore, opened up the possibility for deliberation on structural issues in society.

The second aspect to consider here is how the choice of sub-topics framed climate change a certain way. In the case of the ICA, the short timeframe forced the organisation to limit the scope of the presentations and deliberations. The Chairperson writes that “[c]onsidering the breadth of the topic, it was clear to me that we would have to concentrate our efforts on specific issues in the development of an appropriate programme for Assembly meetings” (ICA 2018, 2). Therefore, after being introduced to climate science and the impacts of climate change, the presentations focused on three sectors with the highest GHG emissions in Ireland: energy, transport, and agriculture. This focus on sectors is interesting because it tells us about the kind of change that is understood to be necessary in the context of the climate crisis, namely that it is polluting, carbon-intensive activities that need to be addressed. However, by zooming in on specific

industries, broader questions regarding the economy, e.g. the prioritisation of economic growth over ecological stability, may be left untouched (Kahane 2018).

Subsequently, most of the recommendations that the ICA ended up making were concerned with the energy, transport, and agricultural sectors, with a fourth category of recommendations revolving around “[p]utting climate change considerations at the centre of policy-making” (ICA 2018, 13). What is good to note here, is that this sectoral focus was decided before the sessions started since the programme – including what speakers to invite – had to be prepared beforehand. In the final report, the Chairperson writes that the decision to focus on these sectors was made “[t]aking account of the issues which arose through the submissions process, the consultations with the Members, and discussions and advice from the Expert Advisory Group” (ICA 2018, 3). However, it seems that it was mainly the group of experts, who supported the Chairperson and Secretariat in devising the work programme, that had a say. The consultations with participants that are mentioned must have taken place during an earlier weekend, before the sessions on climate change started. By then, the participants had not yet received information about climate change nor had they gotten the time to discuss the range of possible areas where change can take place. In other words, it was not the case that citizens deliberated, open-endedly, about climate change and then decided that it was the energy, transport, and agricultural sectors where Ireland should focus its efforts to tackle the climate crisis. The issue with decisions like these being made by organisers will be further discussed in the section on citizen control.

The CCC’s sub-topics were broader and more diverse and, therefore, more in line with the transformations perspective, which states that change is needed in all parts of society. Besides plenary sessions, the process included five thematic groups on the following topics: consumption (‘consommer’), labour and production (‘travailler et produire’), transport (‘se déplacer’), housing (‘se loger’), and food (‘se nourrir’) (CCC 2021a). Similarly to the ICA, these themes were defined by the Governance Committee and it is unclear on which basis they made this decision. An interesting omission is the topic of energy. According to Giraudet et al. (2020, 7) none of the groups discussed the role nuclear power should play since “[t]he issue was deemed settled by the Governance Committee, due to the fact that nuclear power already significantly contributes to France’s relatively low GHG emissions.” This shows how previously held understandings of possible paths shape the deliberation process in significant ways.



As discussed in the previous section, dividing the deliberations into themes may have prevented citizens from addressing underlying and crosscutting issues. Still, the diverse themes allowed the citizens to rethink unsustainable practices within different aspects of life. A rethinking of unsustainable systems and structures, however, would also involve examining the principles and core values that underpin all these activities. These issues were possibly lost out of sight because of the framings of climate change that were used in both the ICA and the CCC. According to systems theorist Meadows (2009), the most effective leverage points are the overarching goals that are set for a system and the mind-set out of which it arises. In contrast, both the ICA and the CCC instead compartmentalised the problem into smaller issues, as is also done in technocratic problem-solving. The remit, on the other hand, was quite different in the two cases. While the task set for the ICA focused on leadership of the state, participants of the CCC aimed to answer what measures could bring about a 40% reduction in GHG in a spirit of social justice. This shows that climate assemblies are not uniform in how climate change is framed and understood.

### Inclusiveness of Perspectives

For climate assemblies to be democratic forums of reflection and debate they need to be inclusive of a diversity of perspectives. This first of all concerns the demographic composition of a citizens' assembly since "a lack of representativeness would raise concerns about possible distortion and exclusion in the wider process of citizen critique, as the views of certain groups would not be picked up" (Böker and Elstub 2015, 133). Inclusiveness also refers to the incorporation of perspectives in different ways. Böker and Elstub (2015) argue that when a citizens' assembly has a certain openness to non-participants, it can be used as a channel to voice critical perspectives that may not yet be represented in the group of participants. Therefore, in this section I will first take a brief look at the demographic composition after which I will move into the speakers that were invited and how the general public was included. I will also pay some attention to different modes of communication since for deliberation to be inclusive it should allow for expression beyond the standard of rational and detached argumentation (Young 1996).

The ICA had 99 members, which were recruited by a public opinion polling company using door-to-door recruitment. Their target for the sample was to be representative of the population registered to vote as reflected in the 2011 Census. To do

so, there were quotas for age, gender, social class (based on current working status), and region (RED C, n.d.). The participants did not receive any financial incentive to participate, besides reimbursement of travel costs and provision of food and accommodation. The document outlining the selection methodology states that “[i]t is acknowledged that this may result in a group that have a stronger civic interest than a truly representative sample” (RED C, n.d.). Something else that stands out is that members of advocacy groups on any of the five topics to be discussed by the ICA would be excluded from participation. Finally, Devaney et al. (2020b, 144) note that there were some “negative perceptions regarding the make-up and mind-set of the assembly members” in media portrayals of the ICA, drawing attention to the fact that the legitimacy of a citizens’ assembly is not only determined by its actual representativeness but also how representative it is perceived to be.

The CCC was somewhat larger with 150 members, who were recruited by a similar type of company but through phone calls. The sampling procedure used the following selection criteria: gender, age, education level, socio-professional category, type of settlement (urban versus rural), and geographical area (including overseas territories) (CCC (a)). To ensure that people would not be excluded from participation for financial reasons, participants received a compensation similar to that of jury service (around €84 per day). Fabre et al. (2021) confirm that although not perfectly proportional, the participants’ characteristics are broadly in line with those of the general population. In a comparison with surveyed respondents from an external study, they found that views on general issues also match fairly well. However, with regards to views on climate change, there are some differences. Participants of the CCC (surveyed on the first day of the process), for instance, more frequently than the general population respond that France must take the lead in climate action (Fabre et al. 2021, 8). Such a bias is understandable as there is a degree of self-selection in the sense that people who are more concerned about climate change may be more likely to agree to participate in a climate assembly. Finally, similarly to the media portrayals of the ICA, there was distrust in the general population regarding the composition of the CCC. Fabre et al. (2021, 23) have found that “49% (of those who have at least heard of the CCC) believe that the CCC was not representative (...). Among them, two thirds think that the CCC over-represents environmentalist or pro-government people.” Although these beliefs were not necessarily informed, the surveys of participants showed that there was some truth in them.

The overrepresentation of people who are concerned about climate change is not insurmountable, however, as is shown by the Climate Assembly UK, which included attitudes towards climate change in its selection criteria (Fabre et al. 2021, 3).<sup>4</sup> To reach inclusiveness of perspectives, rather than only demographic representativeness, such criteria may be necessary. When the goal is to reach an effective response to the climate crisis, some may not find it a problem that those who do not take it seriously or even deny that anthropogenic climate change exists, are not represented in the group of participants. However, as Mulvad and Popp-Madsen (2021, 90) argue, “[a] citizen assembly that decides a priori to discount certain potential standpoints among participants – however insane they may seem to the majority – is running the risk of attacks on its legitimacy.” Furthermore, participants’ views at the start of the process may change as they go through the process of learning and deliberating. As the views that citizens bring with them is only one part of the perspectives included in a citizens’ assembly process, we also need to look at the speakers that were invited to present for the assembly as this is the main way in which citizens were exposed to not just new information but also, ideally, a variety of perspectives.

The ICA had a total of 21 speakers. The presentations were mainly given by researchers and senior public officials, referred to as ‘experts’ in the final report. The first category included 8 speakers and the second 7,<sup>5</sup> all receiving between 15 and 25 minutes to present. Additionally, there were 2 half-hour sessions in which “6 individuals (...) shared their personal experience of becoming a leader in the area of climate change in Ireland” (ICA 2018, 2). These exemplars from the community level included 3 representatives of social enterprises or non-profit organisations, 2 farmers, and 1 fireman. The programme clearly distinguished between expertise and having personal experience from a certain field, and prioritised the former (at least in terms of time). Additionally, for the latter group, the focus was on experience rather than advocacy for a certain standpoint. The reason for this may be that the Irish climate is often highly politically charged due to a strong farming lobby. Devaney et al. (2020b, 143) state that “[t]he independent space provided by the Citizens’ Assembly was crucial in this regard.”

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<sup>4</sup> Another category that this assembly used, but both the ICA and CCC did not, was ethnicity.

<sup>5</sup> There is not always a sharp line between these two categories as some of the researchers also held public positions. In that case, I only counted them in the category researcher.

Excluding lobby and interest groups and focusing on seemingly neutral and trusted sources of information could, therefore, be seen as a way to level the playing field.

However, the dependence on researchers and public officials to provide supposedly ‘objective’ information may have unwanted effects on deliberation. Blue (2015) warns that only seeing expert issue framings as valid can close down rather than open up public debate. She argues that the approach that makes experts solely responsible for knowledge generation has a “tendency to shield dominant institutional claims and practices from scrutiny” (Blue 2015, 154). A quick look at the list of presentations further shows that out of the total of 21 speakers, there were only 6 women (29%). Although women do not necessarily bring with them a different perspective, this overrepresentation of men does add to the privileging of certain knowledges over others, namely those that are male-dominated, scientific, authority-based, and therefore perceived as neutral.

Devaney et al. (2020b, 144) state that “[t]he power of personal, emotional and creative storytelling and imagery is regularly emphasized in climate change communications literature.” Therefore, they argue that the ICA could have been improved by including more personal testimonies, professional communicators such as documentary makers, as well as youth voices like the School Strikes for Climate movement. Harris (2021b) has similarly criticised the ICA for a lack of inclusion of the perspectives of young people, children, and future generations as none of the presentations came from youth organizations or organizations otherwise representing these perspectives. It is noteworthy that there were no speakers from environmental groups, especially because members of advocacy groups were also excluded from being participants. The argument for excluding these people was that such groups would be included in the process in different ways but that turned out not to be the case.

The CCC had significantly more speakers, but also more diversity within them. A total of 137 speakers presented evidence or opinions throughout the process (CCC (c)). This group included academics (9.6%), executives (2.3%), journalists (1%), elected representatives (1%) as well as representatives from businesses (22.6%), NGOs (21%), think tanks (10.5%), institutions (9.6%), administrations (9.6%), unions (8%), and local authorities (4.8%). Some of these presented during plenary sessions (17%), while others will have only reached a smaller proportion of the citizens as they spoke in the thematic groups (51%) or during ‘speed dating’ sessions (30%). Giraudet et al. (2020, 12) comment that “what qualified as expertise was broad, with no clear separation between scholarly expertise and advocacy”. In light of inclusiveness of perspectives and modes of

communication, this may have been positive. However, these authors also note that the organizers of the CCC, who selected the speakers, never made the criteria used explicit, which points to a lack of transparency.

The third way in which both the ICA and the CCC included different perspectives was through a submissions process open to non-participants. Devaney et al. (2020a, 1966) consider such a process to be “a strategy to engage the wider ‘maxi public’, beyond the ‘mini public’ of (...) citizens selected to be involved in the full deliberations.” In the case of the ICA, people could send in their response to each of the five topics a few months before the ICA started working on it. This led to a total of 1,185 responses about climate change, from individuals as well as groups, that were published on the Citizens’ Assembly’s website (ICA 2018, 88). The Secretariat summarised the submissions into a “Signpost” documents and encouraged participants to read it (ICA 2018, appendix E). However, it is unclear whether the perspectives found in these submission were included in the deliberation process as there is “no data on the extent to which participating citizens engaged with the public submissions and how they influenced (or not) the deliberative process or recommendations developed” (Devaney et al. 2020a, 1978).

The submissions process of the CCC worked somewhat differently, in that it gave members of the public the opportunity to respond in between sessions to the work being done by the participants. People could leave their responses on a website, which led to a total of around 3400 contributions.<sup>6</sup> Before the next session started, the organizers would post a summary of the contributions on this website as well as on the platform that participants used for communication (CCC (e)). However, according to Giraudet et al. (2022, 12), “this material was left largely untapped,” mainly because participants already felt overwhelmed with the amount of information. Therefore, a downside of including the broader public is that it may negatively impact the possibility for meaningful deliberation as the latter mainly requires that participants get the time and opportunity for in-depth discussion (as opposed to more superficially including more information).

Non-participant perspectives were further included in the CCC-process because the organizers encouraged participating citizens to engage with their local communities and various stakeholders. This led some of the citizens to actively seek input from society or even organise debates themselves (Torney 2021). Participants were also free to talk to

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<sup>6</sup> This website is no longer available so it is not possible to read the responses.

the media. In that sense, it was a more open process than the ICA, whose members were asked to refrain from speaking about issues while they were being considered (ICA n.d.).

For this reason, in combination with the more diverse group of speakers, we could say that the CCC was more inclusive to different perspectives. It is worth noting that by design citizens' assemblies are more diverse than 'regular' politics due to participants being near-randomly selected (and therefore representative of the population). However, this demographic diversity cannot be equated with inclusiveness as a prioritisation of expert framings may still disqualify non-expert perspectives.

### Citizen Control over the Process

For citizens to be able to express critique and go beyond the ways of thinking that are already present in authorities, there needs to be a certain amount of citizen control over the citizens' assembly process. Both the ICA and the CCC can be characterised as carefully designed and controlled, top-down exercises. We have already seen that the remits were determined by parliament (ICA) or the Prime Minister (CCC) and the agenda, sub-themes, and speakers were all largely decided by the organizers of the process, not by the citizens themselves. In this section, I will take a closer look at the amount of citizen control over the process. In this, I will mainly focus on the ways in which they were not citizen-controlled processes. These include their initiation and purpose, the steering by organisers and experts, and the imposition of legal or policy frameworks on the deliberations. However, throughout I will also point to some ways in which citizens significantly shaped the processes.

The ICA was established through a resolution of the Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Irish legislature, in 2016. It gave the Assembly the mandate “to consider the following matters and to make such recommendations as it sees fit and report to the Houses of the Oireachtas [the Irish parliament]” (Dáil Éireann 2016). In other words, the deliberative process was supposed to be directed, in the first place, towards parliament. As mentioned, it was supposed to cover five different matters. Climate change was initially not included as a topic but was added through an amendment to the resolution by the Green Party (Torney 2021, 384). Thus, the initiation of this citizens' assembly on climate was the result of a political rather than citizen-led process. Therefore, the ICA is a clear example of an 'invited' (as opposed to 'insisted') deliberative space (Carson 2008).

The CCC, on the other hand, could be seen as the result of citizens demanding more political influence. The Yellow Vests protests were first sparked by government measures that were seen as unfairly affecting the poor and rural areas, including a fuel tax and a reduction of speed limits. In response to these protests, the government organised the Grand National Debate, which included a large number of local and regional debates. President Emmanuel Macron first announced the CCC during a press conference that he gave in closing this experiment in participatory and deliberative democracy. In this, he called the climate transition “the most urgent, the most imperative” of the transitions that await France and he highlighted the need to “[use] more collective intelligence on this subject” (Macron 2019). A few months later, the CCC was formally initiated through a letter from Prime Minister Edouard Philippe to Patrick Bernasconi, Head of the Economic, Social and Environmental Council, which was tasked with the organization of the Convention. This letter defined the purpose of the CCC as follows: “to involve the whole society in the ecological transition, through a representative sample of citizens, and to mobilize collective intelligence to move from consensus on the diagnosis to compromise on solutions, and to initiate a profound transformation of our lifestyles” (Philippe 2019). Both the President’s and the Prime Minister’s words emphasize the need for bottom-up problem-solving and using the knowledge that is present in society. This is in line with the CCC being an ‘insisted’ deliberative space, following pressure from a social movement (Carson 2008). Of course, one should be careful not to take these politicians’ words at face value, since the framing of the CCC did not necessarily correspond with the uptake of its proposals, as I will show in the final section.

The organisation of both the ICA and the CCC consisted of various steering bodies. In the case of the ICA, it consisted of a Chairperson, Secretariat, Steering Group, Expert Advisory Group, and a group of facilitators that led the discussions. The Chairperson was Mary Laffoy, a former judge to the Supreme Court, appointed by the government. It was decided that she “shall be the sole judge of order and shall be responsible for the smooth running of the Assembly” (ICA 2018, C1). In this role, she was supported by the staff that formed the Secretariat. The Steering Group consisted of the Chairperson and Secretariat as well as a number of participating citizens. This way, citizens were involved in the monitoring of the work programme, the ratification of speakers, and the evaluation of the assembly procedures (ICA 2018, 58). Finally, the Expert Advisory Group consisted of six academics in several fields, ranging from political to climate science. One of their main roles was “[s]upporting the Chairperson

and Secretariat in constructing a fair, balanced and comprehensive work programme” (ICA 2018, 57). They, for instance, recommended speakers to present to the Assembly, aiming to select people with demonstrated expertise and good communication skills, among other things.

Besides being a part of the Steering Group, citizens could influence the process during feedback sessions. The Chairperson writes that she “listened to the requests of [her] fellow Members” (ICA 2018, 2). However, it is unclear to what extent this was systematically done as the responsibilities ultimately remained in the hands of the organisers. For instance, an essential task as devising the ballot papers (i.e. phrasing the recommendations to be voted on) was carried out by the Chairperson, with the assistance of the Secretariat and the Expert Advisory Group (ICA 2018, 12). As Mulvad and Popp-Madsen (2021, 89) note, throughout the process of the ICA, “a highly professionalized structure was in place.” They go on to argue that, “[a]t the heart of such practical choices of design lies a potential trade-off between democratic autonomy for the selected group of citizens and the epistemic quality of their deliberation” (Mulvad and Popp-Madsen 2021, 89). Indeed, one could certainly argue that the tight timeframe required that the organisers made many of the practical decisions so that citizens could spend their time on the deliberations. However, this also makes that overall, citizens did not have much control over the process. As such, the ICA could be called a form of ‘activation’, rather than ‘empowerment’, with citizen engagement being controlled and regulated by elites (Hammond 2021a).

The CCC had an even more extensive organisation structure, involving a Governance Committee (‘Comité de gouvernance’), Guarantors (‘Garants’), a Support Group (‘Groupe d’appui’), a Legislative Committee (‘Comité légistique’), and a group of facilitators. About this structure, Giraudet et al. (2022, 9) say that, “[t]o [their] knowledge, such a plethora of supervisory bodies is unparalleled in other citizens’ and climate assemblies.” The first two groups were requested by the Prime Minister in his official initiation of the CCC. The Governance Committee consisted of fifteen members with a diversity of backgrounds, including representatives of think tanks, trade unions and business, government officials, and academics from different fields. Each session, they were joined by two citizens randomly drawn from the assembly (Giraudet et al. 2020). Its responsibility was to set the agenda and rules for deliberations. Secondly, representatives of the National Assembly, the Senate, and the Economic, Social and Environmental Council appointed three Guarantors “to provide an outside perspective on the process”



and to guarantee its independence (CCC (d)). The Governance Committee further appointed the Support Group of 19 experts with different backgrounds to provide technical background on climate policies and the Legislative Committee of 6 legal experts. The highly professional organisation shows that being an insisted space cannot be equated with a bottom-up process “in which citizens could exert influence on their own terms” as the process was clearly not led by citizens (Hammond 2021a, 183).

Giraudet et al. (2022) have examined the interactions between the CCC steering bodies and citizens throughout the process. They find that the Governance Committee in particular had significant influence on the framing of deliberations, for instance by deciding on the thematic groups and the experts that citizens were exposed to. Requests from citizens to invite certain speakers, on the other hand, were sometimes not followed up. Furthermore, unlike other citizens’ assemblies, organizers were not required to remain strictly neutral. The researchers who observed the process witnessed how members of the Governance Committee shared their own opinions on certain measures with participants. Still, Giraudet et al. (2022) conclude that the citizens remained independent and that the significant input from steering bodies ultimately did not impair the citizens’ agency, creativity, and freedom of choice.

An important reason for this is that participants clearly pushed back when they felt that organisers overstepped their authority. As Neblo (2015, 186) puts it, “participants are hardly passive receptacles, waiting for organizers to tell them what is true and what to do.” A fitting example here is that of the sub-group that came to be known as “the squad” (‘l’escouade’) (Giraudet et al. 2022, 10). The Governance Committee formed this group in session 3, taking participants from all thematic groups, to handle crosscutting issues such as financing and constitutional changes. However, some citizens found this separation unconstructive, voiced their criticism, and as a result, the group was terminated at the end of session 4. From then on, crosscutting issues were to be discussed in plenary sessions. Landmore (2020, 197) further observed a group of citizens pointing out a conflict of interest in the recommendations of a corporate representative, and a “well-liked troublemaker” interrupting a plenary session by yelling “[s]top treating us like children.” She concludes from these examples that, “ordinary citizens, once empowered, are very protective of their prerogatives and will actively and vocally resist perceived attempts at manipulating them” (Landmore 2020, 197). Therefore, even though the process was organised and designed by elites (i.e. activation), people still had the ability to challenge power, which nuances Hammond’s (2021a) distinction between activation

and empowerment. It is not clear to what extent this applied to the ICA as I have not found comparable observations for that case. However, I suspect that the longer duration of the CCC allowed for more confidence among its participants, the more they became comfortable and familiar with the material and process.

Citizen control over the process was further limited by the imposition of judicial and governance frameworks on the deliberations. In the CCC, this influence was especially significant due to the mandate it received. When President Macron announced the CCC, he stated that, “[w]hat comes out of this convention, I pledge, will be submitted without filter either to a vote in parliament or to a referendum or to direct regulatory application” (Macron 2019). Thus, the CCC seemed to get more of a legislative function than is common for citizens’ assemblies. It has turned out that this “without filter” promise has not fully been kept, something that the next section will take on further. For now, what is important is that this commitment, in turn, required the citizens to produce readily implementable bills (Giraudet et al., 2022).

Therefore, the CCC included a Legislative Committee that provided legal transcriptions of the citizens’ proposals, formulating them in ‘legally sound’ terms and adding technical details. The inclusion of legal support was not without impact as the final report proves (CCC 2021a). In it, citizens’ proposals are continuously followed by detailed comments and provisions regarding the legal status of their ideas. Not all participants appreciated these changes. After the proposals regarding labour and production, the report includes an “alternative opinion”: “We reject all the legal transcripts for the production and labour group as they do not reflect the ambitions of the group” (CCC 2021a, 158). The complaint was supported by 17 citizens, which shows that a significant number experienced the legal requirements as a loss of citizen control.

Although the ICA participants were not expected to provide readily implementable proposals, they were still expected to build on ongoing government efforts. The programme devoted quite some time to explaining and discussing the National Mitigation Plan (ICA 2017a). Citizens were also encouraged to familiarise themselves with national and international climate governance frameworks before the process. On the one hand, one could argue that this allowed citizens to have impact on policymaking. On the other hand, I wonder whether training citizens to think like policymakers may not be defeating the point of citizens’ assemblies.

When deliberation is very controlled, this reduces the opportunity for critique and proposing new or unexpected ideas, which may be in the way of transformation. As

Machin (2020, 161) states “[c]hallenges to the status quo are precisely those that exceed the political realm, that take the establishment by surprise, disrupting normal politics, demanding entry and provoking change.” The next section will, therefore, further explore the presence (or absence) of adversarial voices in climate assemblies. For now, it can be concluded that in both the ICA and the CCC, there was a lack of citizen control over the process due to the highly professionalised and controlled organisation. However, it is also worth repeating that in the case of the CCC, citizens exercised significant influence, first through protests that led up to the initiation of the process, and then by pushing back to authority during the sessions.

### Space for Pluralism and Dissent

Citizens’ assemblies are often praised when they reach a high degree of consensus, as this is understood to be the result of successful deliberation: through learning and deliberation, participants have managed to overcome their initial differences or individual preferences and have come up with solutions for the whole community. However, although such deliberation is constructive, it may not be able to realise the disruption of entrenched structures that is necessary for transformation. As I am interested in climate assemblies as active political spaces where contention over different transformative pathways could play out, this section will explore to what extent the ICA and CCC offered space for pluralism and dissent. I will first discuss the avoidance of conflict during the process and then go into the form that the outcomes took.

Both the ICA and the CCC seemed to avoid conflict between participants. For instance, the ICA’s guidelines for facilitators of the citizen deliberations state that the goal is “a lively, positive atmosphere, with the focus on new possibilities rather than on problems” (ICA 2018, D2). One of the tips for successful facilitation is “[i]f a conflict emerges, help each person feel heard, and seek common ground” (ibid., D6). Similarly, facilitators of the CCC sought to avoid conflict and focused instead on reaching consensus between citizens. Giraudet et al. (2020), a group of researchers that observed the process, note that facilitators seldom organised interim votes in the thematic groups. From this, they conclude that “[r]eaching a consensus, as measured by the absence of explicit dissent, was systematically favored over voting by the organizers” (Giraudet et al. 2020, 13). In other words, although dissent was possible, the design of the process did not encourage it.

Furthermore, there was little possibility for debate between different speakers. In the case of the ICA, speakers were expected to each cover different questions in their presentations, thereby adding new information to the previous speakers rather than providing an alternative perspective. For instance, on the topic of energy, the first speaker explained how energy is currently provided in Ireland as well as its impact on climate change, while the second speaker then outlined “what Ireland’s energy sector could look like if Ireland was a world leader in tackling climate change” (ICA 2018, 71). There was, therefore, an explicit critique of the current energy system but no debate between different alternatives, thereby denying the existence of plural pathways. The experts that presented during the CCC, likewise, had little opportunity to challenge each other. Giraudet et al. (2020, 12) observed how “[t]hey were typically given turns to articulate their views, with very little debate among them.” Even though speakers in both the ICA and CCC emphasized the need for climate action, the lack of debate between proponents of different courses of action weakened the rethinking of unsustainability.

Another factor that affects the possibility for pluralism is the form of the outcomes of the process. Both the ICA and the CCC ended with a voting stage after which citizens’ recommendations were published as a final report, but there are also some differences between the two. As mentioned before, the ICA focused its efforts on the energy, transport, and agricultural sectors. Most of the recommendations that the Citizens’ Assembly ended up making were concerned with these sectors, with a fourth category of recommendations revolving around “[p]utting climate change considerations at the centre of policy-making” (ICA 2018, 13). Out of the five topics discussed by the ICA, the deliberations on climate change received the highest approval rates (Devaney et al. 2020b). At least 80% of the participants voted in favour of each of the 13 recommendations (with 12 recommendations getting 89% or higher). The proposal with the lowest approval rate (80%) was to pay higher taxes on carbon intensive activities.

However, it was clear that the recommendations that the ICA participants voted on during the final session did not cover all thoughts and ideas they had about the topic. As the Chairperson writes, “it was acknowledged that there may be other areas, not covered in the discussion during the two weekends, which Members of the Assembly would like to see reflected in the recommendations” (ICA 2018, 6). Therefore, participants had the option to fill out a response form (or, ‘reflective exercise’) to make suggestions for ancillary recommendations, which led to 35 responses. Based on these, the Chairperson identified four consensus themes and included these in the final report. However, it was

added that “these recommendations cannot have the same standing as those which were voted upon in accordance with the Oireachtas resolution” (ICA 2018, 10).

The response forms themselves are not a part of the final report but are available as an appendix. Reading these, what is striking is the difference in tone from the official recommendations, which are written in rather formal policy language. For instance, one of the responses is a harsh criticism of the Irish political elites, which concludes that “[t]hey should be ashamed” (ICA 2018, B14). The final report, on the other hand, uses mostly constructive language. Moreover, in the citizen responses, we find a plurality of positions. While most of the responses propose additional policies, others are about the way the climate debate is held (“Bin the scientism and promote pragmatism through the plain speaking, uncontroversial and successful practitioners” (ibid., B8)) or about ethical positions (“We are custodians of this planet and there is an onus on each of us to improve our carbon footprint” (ibid., B8)). Questions like these were not reflected in the programme, nor in the recommendations. Therefore, the high approval rates of the official recommendations may also be a sign that these were not very bold or renewing as they only covered uncontroversial (and rather technical) topics.

During the voting stage of the CCC, the group of citizens got to vote on all proposals that the different thematic groups developed. The CCC participants voted per block of measures, approving all blocks but one. The proposal to reduce working hours from 35 to 28 hours a week was rejected. Most of the other blocks got high approval rates, between 85 and 100%. Only the block that included a lowering of speed limits received just 60% of the votes. The participants also voted in favour of holding referenda on two constitutional reforms and recognition of the crime of ecocide (Giraudet et al. 2020). Although the high approval rates were mostly taken as a sign of success, they can partially be explained by the fact that citizens voted per block of measures rather than per individual measure. As Giraudet et al. (2020, 13) argue, this “prevented them from more finely expressing their preference; in particular, it made it more difficult for them to reject a specific measure without rejecting a whole block.” Additionally, there was limited time for the voting stage, with only five minutes of debate about each block of measures, leaving little room for dissent. The voting procedures of the CCC, therefore, did not encourage pluralism.

The CCC report (CCC 2021a), on the other hand, allowed for a more nuanced expression. It gives elaborate explanations of the measures as well as the reasoning and argumentation behind them. It also comments on the trade-offs that participants believe

should be made. Additionally, at some points in the text, there are text boxes with “alternative opinions”, with the names of those who support it. These explain why some people did not agree with (a part of) the proposal in question. The final report also includes a chapter on the proposals that were not adopted by the convention. However, these only include the proposals that did not receive enough votes, not the proposals that were not taken to the voting stage in the first place. It is, therefore, not clear why the final proposals were preferred over others. Overall, the CCC report still gives a much richer illustration of the conversations that citizens had than the ICA report does.

To conclude, in both the ICA and CCC, there was a lack of possibility for conflict during the process, as illustrated by (implicit) behavioural guidelines for participants and the absence of debate between presenters. The focus on reaching consensus was also reflected in the high approval rates. There were some differences in the final reports of the two assemblies, with the ICA report being written in neutralising policy language, while the CCC report had more space for argumentation.

### Impact on Decision-Making

As discussed in chapter 3, one of the main concerns about citizens’ assemblies is the possibility of instrumental, non-committed use by public authorities. Therefore, an important aspect of the transformative capacity of climate assemblies is that the rethinking of unsustainability that takes place during the process is consequential outside of it. A detailed analysis of the uptake or rejection of all individual recommendations is beyond the scope of this project. Rather, this section will discuss the political response to the ICA and the CCC and how the outcomes of these citizens’ assemblies were integrated into the broader decision-making process.

The initial resolution that established the ICA stated that “the Government will provide in the Houses of the Oireachtas [the Irish parliament] a response to each recommendation of the Assembly” (Dáil Éireann 2016). However, only on the topic of abortion did it require the recommendations to be considered by a special committee. Nevertheless, an all-party parliamentary committee was established in mid-2018 to respond to the ICA’s recommendations on climate change: the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action (JOCCA). Over a period of seven months, this committee considered the recommendations in greater detail than the ICA itself had received time

for. The process included hearings of experts as well as a public submissions process (Harris 2021b; Torney 2021).

The JOCCA published its recommendations in March 2019. The report (JOCCA 2019) is structured around the ICA recommendations and can, therefore, be seen as a direct response to the ICA's work on climate change. According to Torney, Devaney, and Brereton (2020), one of its most important elements is the proposal for a new climate governance framework, which built on the ICA's first recommendation around putting climate change at the centre of policy-making. The JOCCA further elaborated and expanded most of the ICA recommendations. However, a notable exception was the ICA recommendation to put a tax on greenhouse gas emissions from agriculture (Torney 2021). As noted before, in Ireland, the debate about the role of agriculture in tackling the climate crisis is particularly contentious. The JOCCA report only recommended that the topic should be given further consideration. According to Torney, Devaney, and Brereton (2020, 229), "[t]his highlights the continued complexity and difficulty for politicians to develop robust, just and meaningful climate action solutions, particularly in politically sensitive arenas such as – in the Irish context – agriculture." It is indeed significant that while the ICA was celebrated for providing a forum not influenced by the agricultural lobby, the JOCCA again refrained from targeting this sector. This illustrates a common problem for citizens' assemblies: citizens may be able to reopen politically sensitive topics but their recommendations are then brought back into the same political process where the initial barriers that a citizens' assembly was meant to overcome remain.

The JOCCA report, in turn, shaped to a significant extent the government's new climate action plan, published in June 2019 (Torney, Devaney, and Brereton 2020). Finally, in July 2021, after a lengthy legislative process, including a general election in 2020, a revision of the climate law was passed, which put in place an enhanced governance framework (Torney 2021). The ICA certainly impacted this law, so in that sense we could say that it was successful in influencing climate policy (Harris 2021a). However, the shift in Irish climate policy that has taken place in recent years should also be seen in the broader context of increasing societal awareness. As Torney (2021, 385) puts it, "[t]he assembly itself and its recommendations are best characterised as an inspiration or spur that set this process rather than its proximate cause." That the new climate law was not understood as a direct result of the ICA is further illustrated by the fact that participants did not receive a follow-up regarding the uptake of their proposals (Devaney et al. 2020b).

In the case of the CCC, there were higher expectations regarding the direct implementation of proposals than there were for the ICA. As mentioned before, President Macron had promised to bring the CCC's proposals "without filter" to the appropriate level (referendum, government or parliament). A week after the final session of the CCC, during a public address at the Elysée Palace, Macron committed to supporting 146 of 149 proposals. However, he invoked three "veto cards" to reject changing the preamble of the constitution (to include environmental protection), installing a corporate dividends tax to finance climate action, and reducing speed limits on motorways (Giraudet et al. 2022). The government then reworked the CCC's proposals into the Climate and Resilience Bill, which was presented in February 2021. An accompanying impact assessment study estimated that the bill's measures together could only reach between half and two-thirds of the government's target. Later, the High Council on Climate indicated that the true impact would be even lower (Giraudet al. 2022, 8-9).

The participants of the CCC came together for an eighth and final session to evaluate the bill later that month. The Support Group and Legislative Committee, who had given technical and legal advice during the process, now provided feedback on the extent to which the citizens' proposals had been followed up by the government (Giraudet et al. 2022). Afterwards, the group of participants voted on several questions about the CCC's process and the government's follow-up. Regarding the latter, they expressed strong disapproval. The question "what is your feeling about the government's follow-up on the Convention's proposals?" received an average grade of 3.3 (on a 0-10 scale) (CCC 2021b).

As the bill moved through the legislative process, it was further weakened. Parliament debated it for several weeks, leading to many amendment proposals. The National Assembly and Senate finally agreed on a law in July 2021. However, it was heavily criticised by civil society for not being in line with the original proposals (Torney 2021). Research by Fabre et al. (2021, 23) has shown that already during the process, a significant part of the French population saw the CCC as "a masquerade set up by the government to close the Yellow Vests' episode with a reconciliatory communication, pretending that the demands for more democracy and climate action had been met." This criticism increased as it turned out that many recommendations were not implemented.

Both the ICA and the CCC, thus, lacked a clear commitment structure. In the case of the CCC, it seemed beforehand that government commitment was high as the process was tightly coupled to Macron's climate politics. While there was much parliamentary



activity around the proposals, implementation turned out to be limited. In the case of the ICA, on the other hand, the influence surpassed prior expectations. Still, the success cannot be ascribed to its institutional design (Mulvad and Popp-Madsen 2021). Irish politicians allowed the citizens' assembly to have influence but would not have faced any legal consequences if they ignored the outcome (as has been the case for some of the other topics that the ICA considered). For both cases, the criticism that climate assemblies do not change the political system in any structural way rings true.

The impact of a citizens' assembly should not only be measured in terms of direct influence on policymaking. Both the ICA and the CCC became a source of empowerment for the climate movements in their respective countries. For instance, in Ireland, the Stop Climate Chaos coalition has urged the government to respect the ICA recommendations. In France, participants of the CCC have even created an organisation ('Les 150') to monitor the government's climate efforts. Some participants have also become prominent figures in the public debate on climate (Giraudet al. 2020). The indirect impacts of climate assemblies on societal transformation are hard to measure but could potentially be substantial.

## Conclusion

This chapter has considered the transformative capacity of the ICA and the CCC by discussing how the following six qualities played out in the two cases: the facilitation of meaningful deliberation, a systemic understanding of the climate crisis, inclusiveness of perspectives, citizen control over the process, space for pluralism and dissent, and impact on decision-making. Since the purpose of this study is to further develop the climate assembly model, it is most important here to establish the shortcomings, challenges, and tensions found. Transformative capacity is not a measurable concept and, therefore, it is not possible to give a straightforward answer about the extent to which the design of the ICA and CCC facilitated a rethinking of unsustainability by the participants. Still, through exploring the different categories, a number of overarching issues came up that point to some broader concerns regarding the relationship between climate assemblies and the logic of transformation that were discussed in chapter 3.

The first relates to the question of negotiable content, i.e. the topics that are (or can be) discussed during the process (Krüger 2022). It is a problem that the design of current climate assemblies mainly supports deliberation on narrow, predefined issues, rather than systemic reflection or a questioning of underlying values or principles

(Kahane 2016). Imitation of the technocratic policy-making process, in which issues are compartmentalised into smaller, manageable problems, therefore, stands in the way of transformative capacity. In both the ICA and CCC, deliberations were divided into sub-topics, which made that there was a lack of possibility to examine the overarching goals of a system or the mind-set out of which it arises (Meadows 2009).

Furthermore, climate assemblies may prioritise expertise at the expense of democratic debate. In both cases, essential aspects of the process, like the agenda and the choice of sub-topics, were mostly controlled by organisers rather than participating citizens. This reinforces Böker's (2017) criticism of mini-publics not being suitable for authentic citizen critique. In the ICA, the almost exclusive focus on technical-scientific expertise also translated into the content of the discussions, which decreased the possibility for alternative framings of the climate crisis and transformation (Blue 2015). Together, the lack of systemic reflection and overreliance on expertise create the risk that climate assemblies only address transformation within the practical and political sphere while leaving the personal sphere unaddressed, even though changes in this realm are especially powerful (O'Brien and Sygna 2013). Including the personal sphere would mean that participants deliberate on beliefs, values, worldviews, and paradigms.

The agonistic critique of deliberative democracy resonated as well as the avoidance of conflict and the focus on reaching consensus during both assemblies may have decreased the influence of more radical voices. As carefully designed and controlled processes, the ICA and CCC did not realise the element of disruption that Hammond (2021a) argues deliberation can have. The focus was instead on developing policy measures, which is in line with the purpose of constructive or system-supporting deliberation.

Finally, the ICA and CCC lacked a clear commitment structure or requirement for authorities to act on citizens' proposals. This points to a lack of empowerment of climate assemblies and confirms the worry that citizens' assemblies do not structurally change the way we do politics (Berglund and Schmidt 2022). This is problematic because transformations towards sustainability require a redistribution of power since entrenched interests that benefit from the current system often resist change. All in all, while both the ICA and CCC came up with rather ambitious proposals for climate action, they were also constrained in their transformative capacity in significant ways. Based on the analysis, the following chapter will develop a proposal to move the climate assembly model forward.

## 6. Moving Forward: Imagining Imaginative Citizens' Assemblies

The purpose of this chapter is to broaden the understanding of what is possible within a climate assembly. In doing so, I respond to the prompt by Böker and Elstub (2015) that experimentation with new forms of mini-publics could enhance their ability to harness the critical and normative dimension of deliberative democracy. As discussed in the previous chapter, some of the shortcomings of the current practice of climate assemblies are that the process insufficiently supports deliberation on systemic issues or underlying values, that they are overly focused on technical-scientific expertise, that the focus on consensus and constructiveness leaves little room for disruption, and that there is a lack of empowerment as authorities are free to ignore the citizens' proposals. Most scholars that are concerned with improving the citizens' assembly model focus on the issue of empowerment. They, for instance, suggest that citizens' assemblies should be more tightly coupled to policy processes to ensure that citizens give useful input for policymakers that will actually be used (see Smith and Setälä 2018). Others argue that proposals with a high degree of consensus among the assembly members should be legally binding (see Smith 2021). An even more far-reaching proposal is to institutionalise the citizens' assembly model by installing a legislative chamber consisting of randomly selected participants (Van Reybrouck 2016).

Although it should absolutely be prevented that citizens' assemblies can be used as a symbolic cover for business as usual, I contend that these proposals are most likely to exacerbate the other shortcomings that I found. To understand why that would be the case, it is useful to return to Hammond's (2020a) distinction between two ideal types of deliberation (as introduced in the literature chapter): constructive (or system-supporting) and disruptive deliberation. While the former is decision-oriented and strategic, the latter is discussion-oriented and open-ended. According to Hammond as well as my own analysis in the previous chapter, citizens' assemblies currently already lie more on the constructive side of the spectrum. Like most other democratic innovations, they follow the logic of solutionism, aiming for concrete, well-planned results (Asenbaum and Hanusch 2021). Further institutionalizing them would make them more narrow, controlled, and decision-oriented, thereby decreasing their ability to contribute to critical, broad, and continuous societal debate. Therefore, while not rejecting the proposals that aim to address the empowerment issue (as citizens' assemblies could exist in different

forms and with different purposes), I will instead go in the opposite direction and explore how citizens' assemblies could support system-disrupting deliberation.

Doing so means taking seriously that the climate and ecological crisis is not simply a technological or even political crisis. Here, I follow the words by novelist Amitav Ghosh: “for let us make no mistake: the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (Ghosh 2016, 9). This chapter, therefore, focuses on the imagination, an often-overlooked dimension in the climate debate, and asks how citizens' assemblies could contribute in this regard. Essential here, is that deliberative processes do not imitate the problem-solving nature of the policy process, which “leaves insufficient room for creative and imaginative responses to the complexity of the crisis” (Hammond 2021b, 288). Instead, this chapter envisions citizens' assemblies as imaginative spaces, that is, forums that are characterised by conscious reflection, creativity, and contestation of otherwise unquestioned narratives. Instead of the output-orientation of current citizens' assemblies, such forums follow the logic of ‘democratic serendipity’: “an exploratory, open-ended mode of participatory engagement, which promises to open democracy for unexpected change” (Asenbaum and Hanusch 2021, 1). By moving beyond system-supporting deliberation and expected change, I aim to contribute to creating citizens' assemblies that have the capacity to rethink unsustainable systems and structures and imagine alternatives.

To do so, this chapter explores four different routes to make citizens' assemblies more suitable for the kind of deep rethinking that is necessary. These are: reflecting on systems, broadening voices and perspectives, inviting conflict into the process, and encouraging creativity, play, and dreaming. Where possible, I will illustrate these proposals with real-world examples to show that they are not simply utopian ideas but can be put into practice in actual deliberative processes. Although it may not be possible to apply all four routes in a single citizens' assembly, they could be combined in different ways and should certainly not be understood as mutually exclusive. Before going into the proposals, I will first expand on the relationship between the climate and ecological crisis and the collective imagination in order to underline why the imaginative approach taken in this chapter is necessary.

## Crisis of the Imagination

The climate and ecological crisis has been put forward, at least partially, as a crisis of the imagination. While the scientific knowledge about anthropogenic climate change is piling up and the disastrous effects of the global dependency on fossil fuels are showing themselves ever more clearly year after year, the carbon-based economy keeps running at full speed. Hajer and Versteeg (2019, 123), who are interested in the difficulty of transitioning to more sustainable modes of urbanization, argue that the problem is not awareness: “Many policy-makers realize that going on like this cannot work.” Surely, the lack of political action goes hand in hand with powerful corporations protecting their economic interests thereby obstructing any real transformation towards more sustainable ways of living. However, these authors suggest that, “the root cause might be that it is very difficult to imagine alternative, post-fossil futures (...) in the first place” (ibid., 123).

The use of fossil fuels is deeply ingrained in the modes of production and consumption that modern life revolves around and as such, in our societal values and in culture at large (Wilson, Carlson, and Szeman 2017). Therefore, to change these entrenched ways of doing and thinking involves harnessing the imagination, which Merriam-Webster defines as “the act or power of forming a mental image of something not present to the senses or never before wholly perceived in reality.” The importance of forming new mental images about the world and the way we inhabit it can hardly be overstated. In the words of Ghosh (2016, 128-129), “to imagine other forms of human existence is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis: for if there is any one thing that global warming has made perfectly clear it is that to think about the world only as it is amounts to a formula for collective suicide. We need, rather, to envision what it might be.”

The latter is captured in the concept of ‘imaginaries’, defined as “collectively held and performed visions of desirable futures” (Jasanoff and Kim 2015, 19). Recent scholarship has highlighted the influence that such conceptualizations and expectations of the future have on present-day thought and action as they shape narratives, policies, and institutions (Hajer and Versteeg 2019; Marquardt and Nasiritousi 2022). The power of imaginaries lies in their normative component as they “encode what is attainable and envision how life ought (or ought not) to be in the future” (Marquardt and Nasiritousi 2022, 624). More specifically, the concept of ‘sociotechnical imaginaries’ highlights how technological and scientific developments are intertwined with broader ideas of social and

political order and visions of the future (Jasanoff and Kim 2015). With regards to climate action, visions of a future society give meaning to individual policies and mitigation or adaptation measures.

Transformations towards sustainability are constrained by different forms of path dependencies and lock-ins, including technological, institutional, and discursive. Marquardt and Nasiritousi (2022, 622) add ‘imaginary lock-ins’ to this list, which they understand as “the result of complex societal mechanisms that limit our ability to reimagine society and develop a desirable alternative future that differs from the status quo of a fossil-dependent society.” Stoddard et al. (2021) agree that the failure in industrial societies to imagine desirable ways of living that do not rely on perpetual economic growth is critical in the explanation of why greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise despite three decades of climate research and political efforts. The crisis of the imagination can, thus, be understood as a lack of attainable, coherent, and desirable post-fossil imaginaries in the public sphere, which hinders the capacity for change.

A second aspect of this crisis is that the influential future imaginaries that do exist are largely formed outside of the public realm and are not democratically debated. Hajer and Versteeg (2019) note that the available imaginaries are mostly corporate and, as a result, highly focused on technological innovation. They further argue that policy-making then becomes a ‘fill out’ exercise of the images created by corporations; a situation that is closely related to the growing divergence between the public sphere and the realm of actual governance (Ghosh 2016). As such, “imagining futures is not innocent” (Hajer and Versteeg 2019, 129). In fact, the development and propagating of imaginaries is inherently political as the actors involved “lay claims to the future, seeking to create a future that suits their interests and represents their values” (Milkoreit 2017, 9).

The fact that there is insufficient democratic debate over various visions of post-fossil futures is a serious problem as there is tremendous power in being able to determine what is perceived as likely or plausible, i.e. “the thought space of decision-making” (Hajer and Versteeg 2019, 128). This is closely related to what Lukes (1974) refers to as the third dimension of power of influencing people’s wishes and thoughts. This form of power often plays out in subtle ways but is one of the most fundamental mechanisms through which power is exercised. Therefore, it is essential that post-fossil futures are imagined collectively and democratically, rather than by corporations or other powerful actors.

Citizens' assemblies could play a role in opening up the collective imagination to alternative ways of thinking about the future and exposing different imaginaries to democratic debate. However, that would require a move away from the current focus on generating implementable policies. Blue (2015, 154) conceptualizes this using Stirling's (2014) distinction between opening up and closing down of policy options: "Processes of 'closing down' policy options involve highlighting a set of possible courses of action that make sense under a particular framing condition. Processes of 'opening up' examine neglected issues, marginalized perspectives and ignored uncertainties." The latter would produce outcomes that are more exploratory (including ambiguities, dissenting views, and alternative interpretations) but that could integrate a range of options for decision-makers and other citizens to consider. Deliberation, understood this way, moves from a "world-making activit[y]" to a "future-making activit[y]" (MacKenzie 2021).

However, I argue that it is not enough to simply redefine the purpose of the deliberative process and the related understanding of what success entails. As the above discussion has made clear, people's imaginations are constrained by already existing representations, many of which are deeply entangled with the carbon economy. Furthermore, the fact that mediatisation is now so pervasive further affects the way we perceive and think about reality: "we are unable to think beyond the circulating images" (Hajer and Versteeg 2019, 129). Moreover, while powerful corporations have the resources to develop detailed scenarios of the future,<sup>7</sup> "different groups' capacity to imagine better futures [has been] systematically eroded" (Stoddard et al. 2021, 675). Therefore, thinking of futures other than those that feature in dominant narratives requires a conscious effort to open up the imagination. That is precisely what the proposals in this chapter aim for; they are meant to open up deliberations to different ways of thinking to allow for alternative imaginaries to surface.

### Route 1: Reflecting on Systems

In the organisation of citizens' assemblies there often is an assumption that we also find in technocratic approaches to climate policy, namely "the assumption that knowledge and action are both furthered when we divide them into smaller pieces over and over again" (Kahane 2018, 200). To make a topic as extensive as climate change manageable,

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<sup>7</sup> To illustrate this point, the method of scenario planning was developed at Dutch Royal Shell, which today has a team of experts in a range of fields that develop possible visions of the future.

organisers divide it into sub-topics that then determine the programme. However, such an approach may lose the bigger picture out of sight. Kahane (2018) illustrates this with the following example. When zooming in on a specific industry like the highly polluting industry of oil sands extraction it would seem like a good idea to invest in developing cleaner technologies. However, this response does not only leave untouched the deeper issue of an economy that is premised on cheap sources of fossil-based energy, it may even push in the wrong direction as investing in cleaner technologies could create the illusion that fossil fuels can be made sustainable. In order to contribute to a real transformation towards more sustainable societies, climate assemblies should instead make a conscious effort to ‘zoom out’.

A more analytical way to think about this is provided by Dryzek (2013) who categorizes the main environmental discourses along two axes: reformist/radical and prosaic/imaginative. It is the second axis that is of interest here. While prosaic discourses “take the political-economic chessboard set by industrial society as pretty much given,” imaginative discourses “seek to redefine the chessboard” (Dryzek 2013, 14-15). Marquardt and Nasiritousi (2022) apply this distinction in order to identify different decarbonisation imaginaries. These differ in terms of their scope: some are issue-oriented whereas others envision system-wide change. Currently, climate assemblies insufficiently support the second type of imaginary due to their focus on generating policy proposals that are implementable in the current system. In other words, while deliberative processes have proven useful to provide input for sectoral transitions, their methods are less suitable for dealing with system-wide transformation. So how can a deliberative process move beyond prosaic or issue-oriented questions to also support reflection on and discussion of imaginative or system-wide types of issues?

Citizens’ assemblies could be seen as protective spaces not only from powerful actors but also from the hustle and bustle of daily life, as they give participants the opportunity to take a step back and reflect. However, it is clearly not enough to simply reserve time in the programme for participants to reflect on systemic issues as the problem goes deeper than that: the previous discussion on the crisis of the imagination has showed the difficulty of thinking beyond the options dictated by the current system or dominant narratives. A first step, therefore, is “the simple, yet profound, act of making these systems visible” (Ziervogel et al. 2016, 8). This involves making explicit the (inherited) assumptions, values, motivations, desires, and mind-sets that are at work in the climate debate but too often remain implicit (Stoddard et al. 2021, 676). Blue (2018, 136)



proposes that organisers of mini-publics prepare issue guides that “provide participants with an overview of dominant and alternative frames of a policy issue, and the values that are contained therein.”

In an imaginative citizens’ assembly, this approach can be taken a step further. Without the pressure of generating a set of implementable policies, citizens could themselves explore the values that play out in different proposed responses to the climate crisis, including how and for whom they work. The goal of the process could be to gain a better understanding of the systemic aspects of the climate crisis, for instance by examining the interplay between the economy and the environment. A citizens’ assembly then becomes an exercise of deconstruction rather than proposing new measures. This creates a certain distance from reality, which makes it possible see immediate circumstances as changeable rather than fixed.

A practical way in which participants can explore the workings of systems is through creating tangible artefacts, one of the fundamentals of systems thinking. This is a way to map systems methodically by externalizing mental models, which can then serve as a common point of reference during deliberations (Kahane 2018). Such artefacts can take the form of physical models, diagrams, pictures, or extensive maps. Prototypes can also be made using building blocks, modelling clay or other craft materials. This gives abstract ideas a material form (Asenbaum and Hanusch 2021, 5). Kahane (2018, 215) argues that when a group creates such models they can “support a common understanding of values, frames, and understandings of the system.” Ultimately, “building to think” could encourage more holistic and transformative responses to the climate crisis. Including artefacts in the climate assembly process would help citizens to see the connections between different aspects of the problem and thereby get a better understanding of the bigger picture.

## Route 2: Inviting Conflict into the Process

The previous chapter showed that the focus on reaching consensus, developing implementable policies, and the voting procedures can restrict the space for pluralism in a citizens’ assembly. Like the agonistic democrats discussed in chapter 3, Marquardt and Nasiritousi (2022, 638), who developed the concept of imaginary lock-ins, argue that “[e]ncouraging contestation and managing conflicts rather than suppressing them” is crucial to overcome such lock-ins.

Imagining post-fossil futures, therefore, requires contestation of dominant narratives that maintain the status quo as well as lively debate between proponents of different futures. Currently, citizens' assemblies and other democratic innovations offer insufficient opportunities for this due to their focus on constructiveness rather than disruption. In other words, “[f]rom a radical democratic perspective, there is a lack of agonistic arenas in which counter-hegemonic positions (...), and questions of principle can be articulated and negotiated” (Krüger 2022, 8). In order to create space for alternative imaginaries, dominant imaginaries need to be rendered contestable, which is why pluralism is a necessary condition for imaginative citizens' assemblies.

The critique regarding the role of conflict in deliberative processes does not only come from agonistic democrats. There are also deliberative democrats that have warned against ‘group hugs’ in mini-publics. Curato, Niemeyer, and Dryzek (2013) identify ‘appreciative inquiry’ as an increasingly popular approach to deliberative forum design and facilitation. This approach stresses the importance of a positive group atmosphere, norms of civility and camaraderie, and encouraging deliberators to focus on what already works well in order to improve these strengths. However, the authors warn against overuse of such a positive approach if it means that “argumentative, blame-seeking and deficit-oriented forms of discourse are considered counter-productive to the process” (Curato, Niemeyer, and Dryzek 2013, 1). Instead, they argue that appreciative inquiry must be balanced with more critical or contestatory approaches.

Agonistic approaches, therefore, seem to offer a necessary perspective on citizens' assemblies, which are almost always approached from the perspective of deliberative democracy. However, some agonistic theorists strongly disapprove of the deliberative model (e.g. Mouffe 2009), which gives the impression that agonistic and deliberative democratic goods are mutually exclusive. Asenbaum (2021), on the other hand, argues that different theories and ideal models of democracy can be used next to each other to highlight different aspects of democratic innovations: “if we apply multiple perspectives to the same object, we can see this object differently” (Asenbaum 2021, 2). Paxton (2019, 141) agrees that “where deliberative democracy is incomplete, agonistic democracy can help to strengthen it.” Her work shows that the two theories can in fact be combined and is useful to get a better understanding of how citizens' assemblies could become more contestatory in practice.

Paxton (2019) explores how democratic innovations can be further ‘agonised’, i.e. how to change existing citizen-centred and participatory processes to further encourage

the agonistic goods of political contestation, contingency, and necessary interdependency. She argues that citizens' assemblies need to give more space to passion, which can be diluted by regulatory processes like facilitation and behavioural guidelines as well as by a lack of empowerment (if it is unclear whether the citizens' efforts will actually have influence). Furthermore, the focus on educating citizens and the fact that expert opinion sets the parameters of deliberations stands in the way of a productive process of value conflict. Finally, the need to reach consensus is not in line with the agonistic understanding of politics as necessarily contingent and can also lead to neglecting minority viewpoints.

To improve these weaknesses and develop citizens' assemblies' pluralistic potential, Paxton (2019) makes a number of proposals. First of all, citizens' assemblies could be initiated by citizens themselves, for instance after reaching a certain number of signatures. That way it could be a platform for critique rather than policy input. Then, rather than supposedly 'neutral' experts educating citizens, the process should allow everyday citizens (chosen by the participants), whose experiences represent various sides of an issue, to share their stories. Emphasis can be shifted to the process (rather than a simple outcome) by moving away from 'either/or decision-making' to, for instance, preference ranking. More extensive media coverage of all arguments and positions, including those that 'lost' the contest, would make the debates that happen during the citizens' assembly relevant for the wider society.

Inviting constructive conflict into the deliberative process also requires suitable facilitation techniques. In both the ICA and CCC, facilitators had trouble with dealing with conflicts between participants. The moderation method of 'dynamic facilitation', which is used in Austrian Wisdom Councils, could help. These councils depend on a skilled facilitator who moves from person to person questioning them in depth, so that each participant speaks for about 10 minutes at a time without being interrupted by other participants. Throughout, the facilitator summarizes the points being made. Asenbaum (2016, 4-5) observed two such processes and found that "despite the controversial issue at hand, an open, tolerant, and productive atmosphere was created." This was not because conflicts were suppressed as participants picked up arguments of others, expressing consent or dissent, or proposing alternative views. Instead "[a] key explanatory factor is participants' practice of rarely talking directly to each other; they mostly interacted via the moderators. Conflict (...) is voiced but channelled by moderators" (Asenbaum 2016,

5). This shows that the conflicts between opposing views can be brought to the fore without participants having active disputes with one another.

### Route 3: Broadening Voices and Perspectives

In the previous chapter, I discussed how climate assemblies largely rely on technical-scientific expertise and knowledge. Rather than opening up the process to diverse perspectives, this approach can “inadvertently close down public debate where only expert issue framings are considered valid, reasonable, and credible” (Blue 2015). The focus on governance frameworks further promotes managerial solutions to the climate crisis. However, if we accept that the current deadlock is partially cultural in nature, such solutions do not suffice. What is needed, in Hammond’s (2021b, 287) words, is “new perspectives and forms of knowledge that politicise, democratise, decolonise, or otherwise unsettle the ideological nature of the technical-scientific discourse and open up imaginative visions of alternative future paths.”

One way to encourage different ways of thinking that break with business as usual is to include more diverse voices and perspectives in the political process. In that regard, citizens’ assemblies already fare much better than traditional policymaking since near-random selection ensures that the group of citizens is demographically diverse. Still, there are groups that do not get the opportunity to be selected as participants, but who are undoubtedly affected by the policies that are proposed by the assembly. This group includes children, as there is a minimum age for participation, and those affected beyond borders, as participants have to live in the place where the assembly is held (or sometimes even be a national citizen). Additionally, there are perspectives that cannot be represented through participation, including those of people yet to be born and non-human nature. In this section, I will explore how citizens’ assemblies could incorporate these voices and perspectives and how doing so, could contribute to opening up deliberative processes to alternative ways of thinking. As Vogel and O’Brien (2021, 3) argue, the task is “not merely about including more voices around the table (...) but about probing and relating to different perspectives, which can open up new imaginaries and possibilities of change.”

#### Including Children

Of the people alive today, it is children (here defined as those under 18) who will feel most of the impacts of the climate crisis, and of the decisions about climate action that are

currently taken (or not taken). Yet, they have least influence on decision-making. In recent years, the example of Greta Thunberg to skip school as a way of protesting climate inaction was followed by millions of school students in over 150 countries (Hayward 2020). Hayward (2020) argues that these school strikers have defied stereotypes about children and youth being passive and apathetic. In other words, “while youth can’t vote, many want their concerns to be heard” (Hayward 2020, 19). Research further shows that many children and youth around the world are worried about the future and have emotional reactions to climate change, including fear, sadness, anger and a sense of powerlessness (Sanson and Burke 2019).

These are strong reasons as to why children have the right to be included in decisions about their future. However, the need to include children’s voices and perspectives in deliberative processes does not only follow from a sense of pity but also from the valuable contributions they can make. Nishiyama (2017) argues that rather than viewing children only as future citizens they should instead be seen as deliberators in their own right because they have unique capacities to contribute to democracy and are already making such contributions in the real world.

Unique to children is their immaturity, which philosopher John Dewey has described not as lacking something but instead “a positive force or ability – the power to grow” (Dewey 1916, chapter 4). Children learn from others, have a strong sense of wonder and curiosity, ask critical or even philosopher-like questions (most notably, ‘why?’), and use their imagination. Therefore, Nishiyama (2017, 6) argues that, children’s immaturity “can potentially cast critical eyes toward cultural traditions or dominant discourses in society that most adults tend to accept uncritically, thereby helping adults deepen their understanding of social issues in a reflective way.” In a deliberative process, children could offer ideas and thoughts that challenge the views that were taken for granted by the adult participants. Furthermore, during deliberations about the environment, it could also be of value that, “viewed from a child’s perspective, the ‘environment’ and ‘ecology’ are more fluid concepts” (Hayward 2020, 18). Such fluidity could contribute to opening up the dichotomy between humans and nature, which many scholars have argued to be at the root of the climate and ecological crisis (e.g. Moore 2017). Finally, the presence of children during a deliberative process could trigger a sense of responsibility, sympathy and willingness to cooperate in the adult participants (Nishiyama 2017).

When thinking about how to include children in the deliberative process, Hayward (2020, 174) reminds us that, “we should be sensitive and vigilant to the way that young citizens can easily be overwhelmed or dominated by authority figures.” Therefore, simply including children as participants in a citizens’ assembly may not be the best idea. However, other ways of including children’s voices and perspectives could be more fruitful. Wojciechowska (2019) recommends enclave deliberation, meaning deliberation in a group of similar members, as a tool of inclusion for traditionally disempowered or excluded groups in decision-making processes. Such fora can provide a space to discuss and clarify their common aims and ideas. Therefore, she argues, “these protected spaces can provide room for the development of ideas that would otherwise be overlooked or ignored” (Wojciechowska 2019, 904). Youth parliaments, which are found in various countries across the world, are examples of such enclave deliberation among children and young people.

The Scottish Climate Assembly provides a fitting example for the use of enclave deliberation among children in a citizens’ assembly process. While the membership to this citizens’ assembly was restricted to those aged 16 and over, the organisers invited the Scottish Children’s Parliament to “support the participation and engagement of children under 16, to ensure their views, experiences and ideas were part of the discussions and calls to action” (Children’s Parliament 2021a). The Children’s Parliament worked with 100 children aged 7 to 14 from 10 schools across Scotland. Using interactive surveys, videos, and games, they learnt about the climate crisis and expressed their feelings and opinions. The process also included creative assignments, such as illustrating their vision for Scotland in the future. The children that participated not only believed they have the right to be included in important decisions, but also that they can make valuable contributions. For instance, Lana (11 years old) said: “Kids have a creative side so you may get some new ideas!” (Children’s Parliament 2021b, 12). Eventually, the group came up with 42 calls to action, ranging from creating a national tree-planting day and setting up sharing libraries for toys and tools to ways to make it easier for children to travel to school in environmentally conscious ways.

The question then becomes how such enclave deliberation among children should be coupled to a citizens’ assembly. There is a serious risk that the outcomes of deliberation among children will only be used instrumentally, for instance to showcase that children got the opportunity to give their opinions, rather than for their content. Hayward (2020, 184) warns that “[a]dults are often keen to create forums to hear the

voice of children, yet in the process these forums can privilege the adult listeners, who then produce well-meaning documents and audio-visual materials drawing on children's opinions to legitimate adult decision-making." To prevent such instrumental use and to make sure that children's ideas are actually included, there should be connections with the 'main' citizens' assembly throughout. In the Scottish case, the Children's Parliament created a series of videos about the children's journeys, findings and key messages, which were shown during several sessions of the Climate Assembly. Participants to the assembly also met the children to discuss with them. Eventually, the participants decided to include all of the children's calls to action in their final report (Harris 2021b).

A final consideration to keep in mind is that installing a children's citizens' assembly could mean imposing the rules of adult politics on children, even though it is their play and the fact that they defy adult rules that make them potential actors of democratic serendipity in the first place (Lester 2013; Asenbaum and Hanusch 2021). Therefore, the section on encouraging creativity, play and dreaming towards the end of this chapter will flip the perspective: rather than asking how children can be included in existing political processes, it explores what inspiration can be drawn from children's play.

### Moving beyond Borders

So far, most climate assemblies have taken place in countries in Western Europe, where the impacts of climate change are just starting to show themselves. However, in other parts of the world, the climate crisis is already a lived reality. Furthermore, the impacts of decisions regarding climate action are necessarily global. Although most climate assemblies have been concerned with developing policies for the local or national level, there have been some experiments with deliberation across borders.

An interesting example here, is the Global Assembly, which was initiated in advance of the COP26 in Glasgow in 2021. The Global Assembly consists of a core assembly of 100 people, and community assemblies that can be run by anyone anywhere in the world. The participants of the core assembly were selected through a sortition process. First, the organisers randomly selected 100 points on the globe using a NASA database of human population density. Then, a local community organization located close to each point recommended 4-6 potential participants. The final participants were selected from this pool of 675 possible candidates through a stratified random sample in order to ensure that the group was representative of the world's population in terms of

gender, age, geography, attitude toward climate change, and educational level (Global Assembly n.d.).

The question that led the Global Assembly's discussions, which all took place online, was "how can humanity address the climate and ecological crisis in a fair and effective way?" The process was similar to other citizens' assemblies on climate in that it included both learning (through an information booklet and presentations by speakers and witnesses) and deliberations among the participants. However, when looking at the proposals, contained in the "People's Declaration for the Sustainable Future of Planet Earth", important differences become apparent. Since the Assembly was not initiated by a government, like other citizens' assemblies, the proposals did not take the form of policy recommendations. Rather, the participants formulated seven principles that should guide global climate action, for instance that it should focus on equity and participation. The declaration also took a moral stance by affirming "the importance of Nature having intrinsic values and rights, and (...) all beings on Earth forming an interconnected whole" (Global Assembly 2021).

Assembly members presented this declaration to political leaders during the COP26. Although it is hard to determine its impact on the international climate negotiations that took place there, the Global Assembly has been called, "a bold and innovative plan that may well be able to put some pressure on international negotiators to make more ambitious climate commitments" (Caney 2022, 150). What is most relevant for the context of this chapter is that the example of the Global Assembly shows that engaging with the global perspective encourages different ways of thinking that take into account notions of responsibility and justice. In a local or national citizens' assembly this could take the form of testimonies by people from countries in the Global South that are most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

### Taking the Perspective of Future Generations

Ghosh (2016) argues that, given our imaginative failure in the face of the climate crisis, future generations may well think that our generation is deranged. There are a number of proposals to better include the interests of these people that are yet to be born in political processes, ranging from the instalment of an Ombudsperson for Future Generations (as Hungary has) or a parliamentary Committee for the Future (as Finland has) to constitutional provisions that grant rights to future generations (Harris 2021b). An edited volume on institutions for future generations also includes a proposal that involves the



formal institutionalization of deliberative mini-publics, which suggests that well-designed citizens' assemblies already include the interests of future generations (Niemeyer and Jennstål 2016).

The interests of future generations are not absent from climate assemblies as can be seen from the fact that many climate assemblies have emphasized the need for decisive climate action and have recommended more ambitious measures than their governments were planning on. However, if citizens' assemblies indeed encourage more long-term thinking than other political processes do, this would be an indirect effect as there is usually no explicit engagement with the perspective of the people who will live in the world that we have left them. I argue that there lies untapped potential in more intentionally activating long-term thinking as this could open up a range of possible alternative futures.

Krznaric (2020, 45) outlines various strategies to cultivate long-term thinking, which are supposed to work as “a mental toolkit for becoming a good ancestor.” One of the arguments he puts forward to open our minds to considering the people that will come after us is called ‘the Arrow’ and goes as follows: If one shoots an arrow into the distant woods thereby wounding someone, it would be gross negligence if the shooter could have known that someone was there. The fact that the person who was harmed is far away is no excuse. Since temporal distance is, in itself, not more significant than spatial distance, the same kind of thinking should apply to the arrows we fire into the future. A powerful way to apply such philosophical arguments is through the indigenous cultural practice of seventh-generation decision-making. The principle originates from the Iroquois, an indigenous people of Turtle Island (North America), and holds that every decision should consider the seventh generation to come. At the heart of such principles, which are found in different forms with indigenous peoples in other parts of the world, is a philosophy of deep stewardship and interdependence of humans and the rest of the natural world (Krznaric 2020).

To get an idea of what it could look like to apply such strategies during a citizens' assembly, we can draw inspiration from the Japanese Future Design movement, which “aims to cope with intergenerational conflicts and to facilitate social transformation towards sustainability by incorporating the perspectives of future generations into present-day discussions” (Hara et al. 2021). Researchers that are part of this movement have collaborated with local municipalities to develop participatory workshops about creating a future vision for the town. In these, some groups represented current

inhabitants while others, recognisable as they wore traditional Japanese coats, assumed the role of future inhabitants. Researchers found different thinking patterns, with the group of future inhabitants being more innovative (Hara et al. 2019). These outcomes led Harris (2021b, 688) to argue that “[t]he inclusion of representatives who would act as imaginary future generations could prove an innovative and very timely means through which the views of future generations are considered in DMPs [deliberative mini-publics] and the wider deliberative system.” In a climate assembly, some participants could be appointed to represent the perspective of future generations in deliberations.

Other Future Design experiments have shown that it may not be necessary to appoint specific participants as future representatives. In the town of Yahaba, Japan, Hara et al. (2021) conducted participatory debates with the goal of creating a vision and appropriate policies for the management of public facilities and housing. The debates consisted of three sessions, on separate occasions, and involved a group of randomly selected participants. During the first session, the participants considered the question from their own perspective. Then, during the second session, they were asked “to ‘time-travel’ to the year 2050 while remaining at their current age” and encouraged to advocate for the interests of this imaginary future generation (Hara et al. 2021, 1004). As a reminder of this task, they again wore the traditional happi coat. During the final session, the participants proposed policies and formulated reasons for their proposals. The researchers found that experiencing the debate from the perspective of both the present and a future generation created a change in perceptions and a greater sense of empathy. A climate assembly could involve a similar change in perspective by devoting one session to deliberating as if part of the future generation.

### Involving Non-human Nature

An increasingly common proposal for giving political representation to non-human nature is by introducing “human proxies for non-humans” (Gray et al. 2020, 170). These proxies would then defend the interests of the entity they represent to their best-informed understanding of what those interests entail. According to Gray et al. (2020), people with specialist ecological knowledge would probably be most suitable to fill these roles because, in the absence of explicit authorization by non-humans themselves, the legitimacy of representation is mostly determined by the knowledge that proxies possess. Von Essen and Allen (2017) suggest that animal rights and environmental NGOs could claim insights into non-human interests. They further argue that “deliberative mini-

publics could provide an appropriate institutional backdrop for testing the discursive representation of non-human animals by human proxies” (Von Essen and Allen 2017, 649). The deliberative process would function as a filter for the claims made as they would need to prove themselves being publicly defensible.

In a citizens’ assembly, the group of participants could be complemented with proxies to represent those biotic communities that are relevant for the topic of deliberation. However, the danger with this approach is that the deliberations about nature could become overly dependent on scientific expertise at the expense of democratic debate. In this regard, Brown (2018, 33) warns for “moral or scientific technocrats who attempt to shut down democratic debate with claims to speak for nature’s objective interests.” Alternatively then, a number of participants to a deliberative process could be chosen at random to investigate the non-human interests that are relevant in a specific issue in order to discursively represent these during deliberations.

However, Meijer (2019, 220) argues that when it comes to the political inclusion of non-human animals, this approach does not go far enough: “When we start from the idea that non-human animals are individuals with their own perspective on life and their own ways of expressing themselves, it becomes clear that it is not enough to let humans represent them in a deliberative human structure (...): we need to investigate how we can change this structure with them.” Meijer encourages her reader to think beyond human political spaces and locate the spaces where political interspecies interaction already takes place, discussing the example of the conflicts over space that happen between geese communities and humans who represent aviation interests at Schiphol Airport in the Netherlands. She argues that there is a need for new political experiments in which decisions are informed by actual interactions with geese.

Although interspecies deliberation may be possible on a smaller scale and in specific locales, it is difficult to imagine what this could look like in an actual citizens’ assembly. However, I do agree with Meijer that proxy representation to some extent erases the non-human perspective as non-human interests are turned into arguments that then compete, on equal footing, with other arguments of economic, practical, or cultural nature. Proxy representation may be necessary if it turns out that there is insufficient discursive representation for environmental arguments but it is unlikely to bring about different ways of thinking. The following advice by Meijer (2019, 235) points to a more fruitful avenue in this regard: “A very first step towards the inclusion of goose voices in existing political decision-making could be for human politicians to meet the geese about

whom they are making decisions.” In other words, move deliberations about the environment out of stuffy conference rooms and into the outside places that are home to the non-human others that will be impacted by the decisions.

During the Irish Citizens’ Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, this idea was put into practice in the form of a field trip. The group of participants, who made recommendations on how the State should respond to the loss of biodiversity in Ireland, visited three examples of biodiversity management in different environments around Dublin. The chair of the Assembly explained that the visits would “help the citizens understand some of the practical issues, challenges and opportunities associated with managing, protecting and restoring biodiversity” (Lee 2022). I would argue that the value of such field trips is more significant than simply exposing citizens to the practicalities of an issue. It is well-established that exposure to nature comes with a host of benefits for both physical and psychological wellbeing, but it can also create a stronger sense of connection to and interdependency with the natural world (APA 2020).

The positive effects of outdoor activities may even extend to the quality of deliberations as is exemplified by the recently developed method ‘deliberative walks’, defined as “[a] participatory process in which the participants, by deliberating in small groups and joining facilitated walks, tackle a complex policy issue that has highly intertwined social and physical dimensions” (Raisio and Ehrström 2017, 29). Like in outdoor pedagogy, the process encourages learning by moving between the abstract and concrete and allows participants to experience an issue with all senses (Lindell and Ehrström 2020, 484). Including walks and other outdoor activities could also make the deliberative process more inclusive as some people may be more comfortable with these types of activities over more formal discussions focussed on reason-giving.

#### Route 4: Encouraging Creativity, Play and Dreaming

In line with the topic they aim to address, climate assemblies tend to be rather serious. However, there is a risk in imitating the problem-solving policy process as it may lead to an overly rational, economic, and technical approach that reproduces the structures that produced the climate and ecological crisis in the first place. Following the logic of democratic serendipity, it becomes clear that creativity, playfulness, and dreaming are a necessary counterbalance in citizens’ assemblies (Asenbaum and Hanusch 2021). All

three are closely related to the concept of imagination and are, therefore, essential attitudes or states to be fostered by imaginative citizens' assemblies.

Creativity is already something that is valued in participatory processes as the ideas and thinking of citizens are seen as different, perhaps less constrained, than those of policymakers. The outcomes of such processes, including citizens' assemblies, are often praised for their originality. However, this is a rather narrow understanding of creativity as problem-solving in new or unusual ways. Creativity in a broader sense is probably most clearly found in art. It has been argued that artists play an indispensable role in the transformation towards sustainability (Dieleman 2008; Hammond and Ward 2019; Clammer 2014). For instance, Hammond (2021b, 294) argues that "art plays a key creative role in 'unlocking' and thus enabling the imagination of new, previously unthinkable societal futures". Works of art, be it visual, literary, or performing, can make one see things from a different angle and "prompt fundamental reflection on political concepts and issues" (Saward 2019, 6). They could therefore be used as a starting point for conversation during a citizens' assembly.

However, it could be even more fruitful to engage citizens themselves in the creation of art. The artistic process, more so than the final product, is characterised by search and inquiry: "Art is in essence exploring, shaping, testing and challenging reality and images, thoughts and definitions of reality" (Dieleman 2008, 110). Asenbaum and Hanusch (2021) envision 'democratic ateliers' as open spaces where people can come together to engage in art projects with political relevance. These spaces are characterised by "openness, freedom of expression, and disruptive change" (Asenbaum and Hanusch 2021, 8) and are supposed to work as an enabling infrastructure for forms of political agency that are less-talk centric. As such, they take seriously the democratic role that visual, sonic, and embodied engagement can play.

Most of the participants to a citizens' assembly are, of course, not trained as artists, which means that some of them will not be used to or even comfortable with engaging in creative processes. Therefore, it is essential that the focus is not on the final product, but rather on a sense of free exploration of the issue from a different angle, for instance by portraying it with physical materials rather than words. In other words, it needs to be a playful process. Fun theorist De Koven (2020, 115) explains that in order to create we need to get into a delicate state of mind which he calls the 'play mind': "[t]here we can almost forget about what we're 'really' trying to do, and just fool around with ideas." Creativity and play are, therefore, closely connected.

Only recently, there has been some attention for the role that playful interactions can have in deliberations. It has been suggested that although play in itself is not deliberation per se, it can serve deliberative ends, for instance by building trust between participants, maintaining a positive group atmosphere, and increasing motivation and engagement (Craig 2022). Some citizens' assemblies already include playful elements. For example, the CCC had a speed dating activity where participants could talk to people engaged in the climate field. Sometimes ice-breaker games are used to develop a sense of community among the participants at the beginning of the process. However, play serves a deeper function as an essential aspect of imagination, rather than simply being instrumental to facilitating deliberations.

This last point become clear through Craig's (2022) conceptualisation of 'deliberative play' as a communicative practice. He identifies four key features, which show the connection between play and the opening up of alternative futures. The first is an indeterminacy or uncertainty of outcome. This is, of course, also a necessary condition for democratic serendipity. Second, "is a free, loose, loping, to-and-fro form of movement (free play) in thought and discourse" (Craig 2022, 4). Third, deliberative play requires an 'as-if' orientation, which "involves 'entertaining' or 'playing with' ideas that one does not necessarily believe, as if one might believe them, in order to consider alternative actions or solutions" (ibid., 5). This sort of open-mindedness is essential for new imaginaries to emerge because these do not yet have firm believers to argue for them. Fourth, deliberative play can be framed as either cooperative or competitive, thus taking different forms.

There are several ways to include playful elements in a citizens' assembly. Lerner (2014) argues that organisers of participation processes should draw on game mechanics, such as the creation of artificial conflict and a 'magic circle' (which sets the boundaries of the play space), to make such processes more fun as well as effective. Inspiration can also be drawn from so-called 'labs' (e.g. social labs, innovation labs, change labs, etc.) that engage diverse stake-holders in experimentation and solution generation. An important feature of the lab-format is that they shift the focus from talking to doing by facilitating embodied activities, such as deliberative walks, avatar role-play or Lego-modelling (Asenbaum and Hanusch 2021). In their vision of 'democratic playgrounds', Asenbaum and Hanusch (2021) incorporate exploratory scenario building and role play where everyone can participate to the scene. The latter comes from participatory theatre which

“may constitute a microcosm or prefiguration – small in scale and limited in impact – of a more participatory political community” (Chou, Gagnon, and Pruitt 2015, 610).

Finally, imaginative citizens’ assemblies should give space to dreaming as this can be an important force for change. As Duncombe (2007, 182) explains: “Dreams are powerful. (...) [They can] inspire us to imagine that things could be radically different than they are today, and then believe we can progress toward that imaginary world.” Dreaming of a better future is born out of discontent with the present and can, therefore, help identify where change needs to take place. Utopias, understood as fantasy images of better worlds not imposing blueprints, can serve as direction towards alternative futures (Jovchelovitch and Hawlina 2018).

What creativity, play, and dreaming share as activities is that, though they can serve a purpose, in order to do them well one needs to feel like they do not. This is put well by Pendleton-Jullian and Brown (2016): “It is precisely because the imagination is given permission to play without pragmatic intent that it finds connections between things that are not obvious or easy. It finds correspondences that the reasoning mind might never see. It plays with boundaries. (...) While not purposeful by intent or pragmatic by nature, it is precisely this kind of activity that has a pragmatic possibility in a world that is rapidly changing and radically contingent.” Such a free state is hard to create in a carefully designed setting like a citizens’ assembly, but moments or even sparks of creativity, play, and dreaming can happen throughout the process as long as organisers as well as participants are open to it.

### Some Practical Considerations

Paxton (2019) points to a tension that is overlooked in most literature on citizens’ assemblies: “Whilst the lengthiness of citizens’ assemblies is valuable for the emphasis it places upon the process, it also threatens to overwhelm participants with both time and intellectual burdens” (Paxton 2019, 156). In the previous chapter, I showed that time constraints prevented participants from meaningfully deliberating. On the other hand, an overly long and tedious process could strip a citizens’ assembly from passionate engagement of its participants, or could even prevent a significant group of citizens (e.g. those with less leisure time or interest in politics) from participating in the first place. Therefore, the danger of the proposals that I put forward in this chapter is that more and more elements are added to a citizens’ assembly, thereby negating the purpose that the

proposals aimed for in the first place: more creativity and openness. This raises an important question: how can citizens' assemblies be made more open and lively while also delving deep and approaching issues systematically?

To achieve this, citizens' assemblies would have to be organized on a regular basis, rather than being one-off events. That way, participants can build upon previous efforts. This regularity would also familiarize people, including politicians, with the notion of randomly selected citizens making recommendations, fostering trust in their judgments and ideas. Moreover, increased media attention is necessary to create broader awareness and facilitate a larger societal discourse. Because the continuous development of ideas is an essential element of sustainability transformations, the process should be viewed as an ongoing, open-ended endeavour. That way, imaginative citizens' assemblies could become part of the fabric of society and thereby contribute to a deliberative political culture (Hammond 2020b).

## Conclusion

This chapter has embraced the critical role that the imagination plays in the transformation towards sustainability. De Koven (2020, 82-83) reminds us: "Imagination isn't something that just takes place in our dreams or fantasies or creative endeavors. It is much more central to our lives as human beings than that. It is the faculty that makes society possible." In order to enable far-reaching and fundamental change of society, I have envisioned citizens' assemblies as imaginative spaces, characterized by conscious reflection, creativity, and contestation of the status quo. In doing so, I aimed to counter the problem-solving nature of traditional policy processes and explore the potential of citizens' assemblies to support system-disrupting rather than system-supporting deliberation. Four key routes have been proposed to enhance citizens' assemblies: reflecting on systems, embracing the role of conflict, broadening voices and perspectives, and encouraging creativity, play, and dreaming. Developing the climate assembly model in these directions could improve its transformative capacity.



## 7. Conclusion

The purpose of this study has been to explore the transformative potential of citizens' assemblies on climate change. In doing so, I have been led by the following research question: *What is the potential of citizens' assemblies on climate change to contribute to deliberate transformations towards sustainability?* In an effort to find an answer to this question, I took a number of steps, which I will summarize below.

Chapter 2 conceptualised transformations towards sustainability as involving far-reaching and systemic societal changes beyond technological or managerial solutions alone. It embraced an enabling approach to transformations, emphasizing the importance of reflexivity, agency, and imagination. It acknowledged the inherently political nature of sustainability transformations and sketched the outlines of a politics for transformation that is democratic, committed to pluralism, and challenges the status quo. Additionally, it discussed why today's democracies are constrained in enacting transformation, focusing on short-termism in politics, the capture of political processes by powerful interests, technocratic policymaking, and the hegemony of capitalist ideology and discourse.

Based on this theoretical discussion, I have argued, throughout the thesis, that there is a need for inclusive democratic spaces where different transformation pathways can be debated. Additionally, I have emphasized the need for building societal capacity to rethink the values and principles underlying unsustainability and to envision alternatives.

Chapter 3 discussed deliberative democracy and deliberative mini-publics as candidates to embody the described politics for transformation. The political theory of deliberative democracy is rooted in critical theory and focuses on the careful consideration of different perspectives, thereby improving reflexivity. Furthermore, deliberation in political processes is often linked to sustainable outcomes. Yet, doubts remain about deliberative democracy's ability to disrupt the status quo and enact systemic change. This is especially true for the use of deliberation in mini-publics (including citizens' assemblies), where a randomly selected group of citizens discusses a public issue to inform political decision-making. In the context of the climate crisis, citizens' assemblies are praised for providing a protected space to consider climate action. However, the risks of instrumental use and assimilation to the broader system they operate in, as well as their limited contribution to a more fundamental transformation of politics, make their transformative potential questionable. The chapter concluded that due

to the ambiguity surrounding the nature of climate assemblies, there is a need to consider how real-world climate assemblies relate to the logic of transformation.

Chapter 5 examined this for the cases of the Irish *Citizens' Assembly* (ICA) and the French *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat* (CCC). It started by conceptualising the transformative capacity of climate assemblies as the extent to which they facilitate the rethinking of unsustainable systems, structures, and practices. I proposed six qualities that can be used to evaluate this: the facilitation of meaningful deliberation, a systemic understanding of the climate crisis, inclusiveness of perspectives, citizen control over the process, space for pluralism and dissent, and impact on decision-making. These categories were used to discuss the ICA and the CCC based on an analysis of academic studies and relevant documents. Both cases can be characterized as carefully designed and controlled instances of citizen deliberation, although there were also notable differences. Shortcomings found include inadequate support for deliberation on underlying values, limited space for dissenting views, lack of commitment from governments, and over-reliance on expertise at the expense of democratic debate and citizen empowerment.

Chapter 6 took the findings from the previous chapter as its starting point in order to move the climate assembly model forward. It underlined the important role for collective imagination in transformation processes and proposed to redefine the purpose of deliberation as opening up alternative ways of thinking about the future. Some strategies to enhance the imaginative dimension of climate assemblies include reflecting on systems, embracing the role of conflict, broadening voices and perspectives, and encouraging creativity, playfulness, and dreaming.

The transformative potential of climate assemblies, then, lies in their ability to provide a forum for reflection and debate, where citizens can deliberate about the future of their society, free from the meddling of powerful interests. The random selection of people can ensure that a diversity of voices is included in the conversation, while the focus on deliberative activities allows for the questioning of unsustainable norms. Yet, to harness this transformative potential, climate assemblies would have to move away from the logic of solutionism and become more open-ended, disruptive, and imaginative. Only then will they lead to unexpected results that could change fundamental aspects of society.

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### The Future of Climate Assemblies

Since I started writing this thesis, there has been a notable rise in the number of climate assemblies, particularly in Europe. Germany, Luxembourg, Austria, and Spain have recently witnessed the organisation of national climate assemblies and there are many more examples at the local level. Studying a rapidly evolving landscape is challenging. Consequently, my focus has remained on examining the ICA and CCC. It is, therefore, essential for future research to investigate how newer climate assemblies deviate from these initial examples. Specifically, it should be determined whether these assemblies are aligning more closely with or moving further away from the concept of imaginative citizens' assemblies that I have presented in this study.

The proliferation of climate assemblies may indicate that the cases studied in this thesis were merely the initial stages of a larger trend. It is probable that we will observe a further surge in climate assemblies in the future. The recent assemblies on biodiversity loss in Ireland and energy poverty in Poland also point to a diversification of environment-related issues that can be addressed by a citizens' assembly. Moving forward, it is crucial to remain vigilant regarding downsides and potential challenges that may arise. These include the concern of powerful actors co-opting citizens' assemblies or governments orchestrating citizen engagement to suit their agendas; a risk that is likely to increase the more mainstream the citizens' assembly model becomes. Researchers studying the phenomenon should, therefore, adopt a critical approach that is sensitive to power relations.

Additionally, we need to be wary of a 'one-and-done' mentality, where the outcomes of citizens' assemblies are treated as the end of a negotiation process rather than part of an ongoing and open-ended transformation towards sustainability. My thesis suggests that the climate assembly model should not be static. Its purpose, design, and workings are, to a certain extent, open to interpretation, and should move along with the

societal needs of different stages in the transformation process. In this light, imaginative scholarship can contribute to creating new possibilities for the way politics is done.

### Final Remarks

Similar to many master's students undertaking their thesis, I, too, have encountered doubts and worries throughout the research process. However, most of my anxiety has been fuelled not by getting the right words on paper (although there was plenty of that) but by the state of the world and where it is going. The climate crisis worries me immensely and engaging with it on a daily basis has been challenging at times. When reading headlines like “World heading into ‘uncharted territory of destruction’”<sup>8</sup> it can be difficult not to lose oneself in pessimism.

What has been hopeful about studying citizens’ assemblies is that they are built around the idea that we, as citizens, can come together and decide to change the course of society. This is essentially what deliberate transformations are all about. As Wright (2010, 370) aptly puts it, transformation “will not happen simply as an accidental by-product of unintended social change; if this is to be our future, it will be brought about by the conscious actions of people acting collectively to bring it about.” Therefore, nurturing a vibrant public sphere that brings individuals together is as important as ever before. Democratic politics, in this sense, extends far beyond parliaments and ministries, as emphasized by Hannah Arendt’s (1958) conception of political action. In her spirit, we could say that it is in people coming together in a public space that we find the possibility for new beginnings, enabling us to accomplish what may initially seem infinitely improbable. This is where, ultimately, the transformative potential of citizens’ assemblies lies.

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<sup>8</sup> The Guardian, September 13, 2022.

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