

ENHANCING CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT ON THE CLIMATE CRISIS: THE ROLE OF DELIBERATION



CITIZENS' CLIMATE RESEARCH PROJECT

Laura Devaney, Martha Coleman, Diarmuid Torney and Pat Brereton

Dublin City University

September 2019

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

The Citizens' Climate research project, based at Dublin City University, was funded by the Environmental Protection Agency to draw lessons from Ireland's Citizens' Assembly for deepening public engagement on climate change.

The project team examined the contexts in which deliberation can contribute to enhancing public engagement on the climate crisis, and developed guidelines for conducting and communicating within citizens' assemblies and other types of deliberative forum when appropriate. This output summarises the project results.

The Irish Government's Climate Action Plan 2019

specifically calls for improved public awareness of the need for climate action. Crucially, the Plan proposes a significant step-up in government engagement with citizens and communities through better mobilising structures and initiatives "to inform, engage, motivate, and empower people to take climate action" (p.17). Citizens will be at the heart of the low-carbon transition and it is essential that they are engaged, empowered and supported towards more sustainable practices. Deliberative forums represent a possible mode of engagement and mobilisation.

IRELAND'S CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

The Irish Citizens' Assembly comprised of four key elements:



Established in 2016, the Citizens' Assembly afforded 99 citizens the time, space, and structure to consider five complex public policy questions in a deliberative way. Its deliberations on Ireland's constitutional ban on abortion received the majority of time and attention.

Climate change was another topic examined by the Assembly. Its recommendations were significantly more radical than many observers expected. An all-party parliamentary committee

was set up in autumn 2018 to consider these recommendations. It issued its own set of recommendations in spring 2019, which were similarly far-reaching and endorsed most of the Assembly's recommendations.

The format and impact of the Irish Citizens' Assembly has been praised internationally, with many countries now turning to the model for lessons and best practice.

PURPOSE OF THIS RESOURCE

Citizen engagement can take many forms. Deliberative forums can connect experts, stakeholders and citizens, mobilising them to collaboratively tackle the climate crisis. This resource aims to provide guidelines for policymakers wishing to utilise deliberation to further engage citizens.

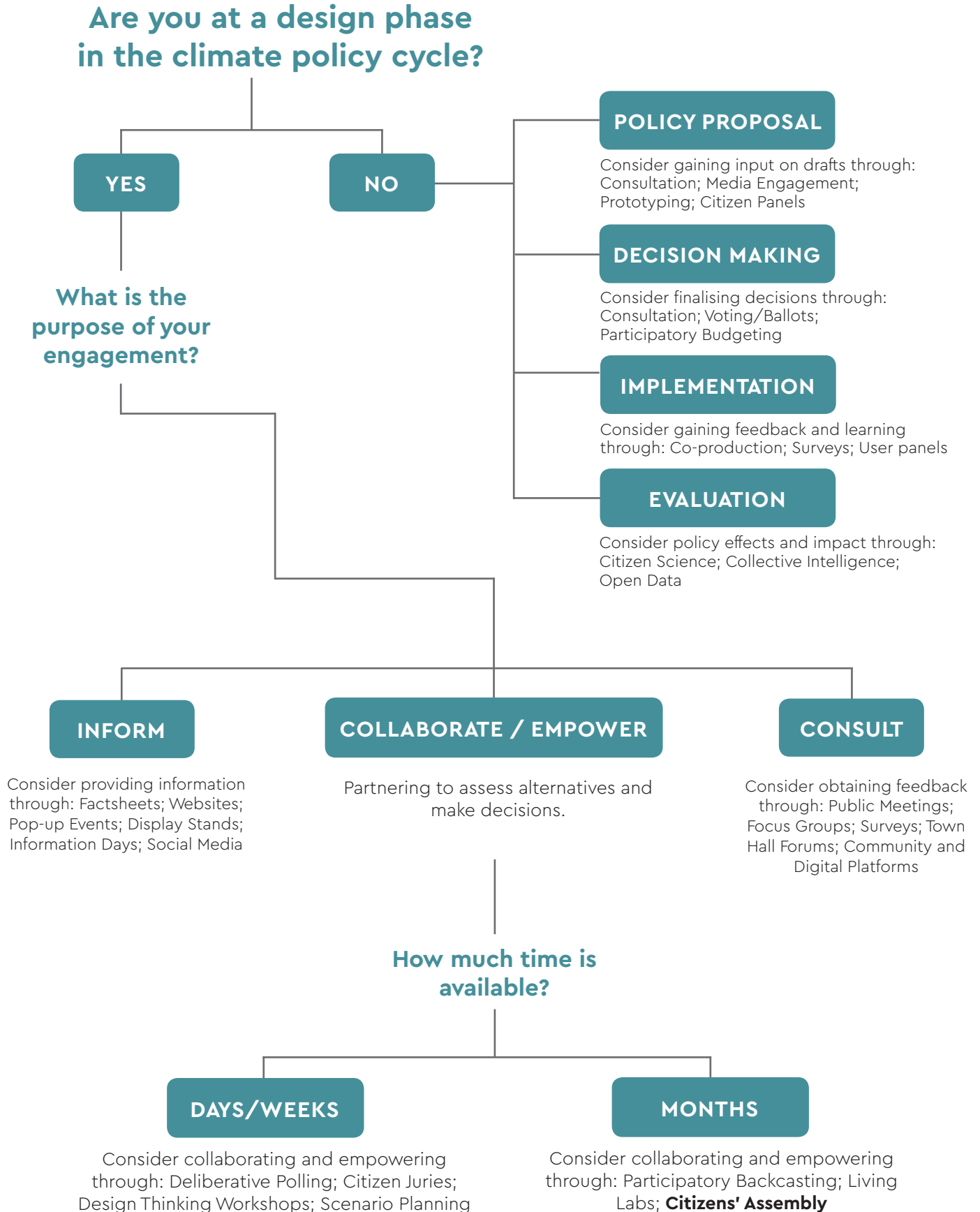
It aims to provide answers to policymakers questioning:

- 1) What form of public engagement is appropriate?
- 2) If and when deliberation is appropriate, what rules should I follow?
- 3) How should I communicate about the climate crisis?

The resource is structured around these three questions, elaborating established best practice and empirical results from our research related to climate governance, deliberation and communication. It details aspects that worked well from the Citizens' Assembly on climate change as well as suggestions for using deliberation as a means of public engagement. In doing so, the resource aims to contribute to creating a shared public engagement vision and recommendations to enable a roll out of climate-orientated deliberative forums, including the potential for enhancing the National Dialogue on Climate Action and other efforts.

PART I THE POLICY CYCLE

Deliberation will not be suited to every topic or policy question related to the climate crisis. Follow the flow chart to consider what form of public engagement is most appropriate according to where you are in the policy cycle, the purpose of your engagement and the time that you have available.



PART II DELIBERATION

Drawing on the findings of the Citizens' Climate project, we propose ten DELIBERATE guidelines for conducting successful deliberative forums.

D DISTINCT QUESTION

Deliberation works best when there is a distinct policy question that needs to be answered. The question proposed needs to be specific enough to ensure a depth of conversation and tangible results. An overarching question can in turn be broken into sub-questions.

E ENGAGE EARLY

Where possible, citizens should be engaged early in the policy cycle. This is important so that participants do not feel that they are being asked to endorse a decision that has already been made. Citizen views should be used to help shape future decisions. Early participation will also help to mitigate accusations of NIMBYism at later policy implementation stages.

L LEVERAGE COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS

Community groups such as Tidy Towns, GAA clubs or Rotary organisations operate across the country with already significant community buy-in. Such groups can be incorporated into deliberative forums as speakers, or alternatively can be involved in the roll out and delivery of the actions agreed by a deliberative forum.

I IMPACT OF DELIBERATION

A guaranteed response from government (local and/or national as appropriate) to the recommendations of a deliberative forum is needed. Procedures should be agreed in advance for taking forward citizen input. Generating legally binding decisions from the citizens' recommendations would take this further though this may not be appropriate, or indeed desired by citizens in all cases.

B BOOST DIVERSITY

Inclusivity of deliberative forums should be promoted. This can be enhanced by providing supports for people who otherwise may be unable to participate, such as those with disabilities, parents with young children and those with financial limitations. Supports in terms of quality food, accommodation, travel, childcare and accompanying aides should be provided to participants where feasible.

E ENGAGEMENT AS A PROCESS

Citizen engagement should be considered not as a one-off event but rather, where possible, a continuous learning and feedback process for both politicians and citizens. Effective follow-up communications are crucial to notify participants of the progress of their recommendations. This will help to ensure legitimacy for citizens and accountability for politicians to utilise results.

R RESPONSIVE FORMAT

The specific format of a deliberative forum should take account of the stage in the policy cycle, the nature of the topic to be discussed, and the amount of time and resources available. The implementation of agreed rules is important in ensuring respectful debate and non-repetitive, inclusive discussions. Where resources permit, consideration should be given to involvement of professional facilitators.

A ALLOW TIME

Participants in a deliberative forum must be allowed sufficient time to read and digest expert material in advance of the event. Agreed deadlines are essential amongst all those involved. The time allocated to topics must be sufficient, but account should also be taken of the limited time available to participating citizens.

T TRUSTED SPEAKERS

The selection of expert speakers has a significant impact on the quality of debate, citizen learning and outcomes of deliberation. Ensuring a balanced and transparent selection is key. Personal testimonials should be included alongside scientific presentations and international best practice. Media presenters or celebrities engaged in environmental programming may boost impact.

E ENSURE REFLECTIVE DISCUSSION

Reflective discussion is a core component of the deliberative process. Participating citizens need to not only receive information but be provided with the time and space to reflect on it and to discuss with their fellow citizens, including those holding differing opinions. Respectful engagement, dialogue and listening is crucial.

PART III COMMUNICATIONS

This section combines best practice in climate crisis communications established from academic research and project findings. The ENGAGES guidelines may be utilised by experts and witnesses when presenting in a deliberative forum. Insights are also relevant for wider climate crisis communications.

EVERYDAY LANGUAGE

Use simple, persuasive and accessible language. Avoid jargon and preaching. Use a limited number of relevant key factual statements. Home in on three key messages per communication to avoid getting lost in the detail. Do not talk about climate change only in the future as this can take from the urgency of the problem. Action is needed now and this conversation must be encouraged into everyday conversation.

GET CREATIVE

Be imaginative in the delivery of communications. Combine expert presentations with interactive videos, flipcharts, games, etc. Mix formal and informal approaches. Imagery can also be powerful in climate crisis communications, including showcasing real people, relatable contexts and emotionally powerful content. Protest imagery should be balanced with positive imagery. Consider using poetry, music and storytelling for impact, and humour when appropriate.

GOOD NEWS

Focus on solutions. Show people what they can do and empower communities to have a meaningful role. Balanced optimism is required that identifies the problem, illustrates ways to overcome them, and addresses any barriers to change that citizens face. Lead with the opportunity to create more vibrant and resilient climate positive communities. Next, clarify the climate challenge that the costs of inaction are adding up. Conclude with ideas that inspire citizens to create positive change.

SHARED VALUES

Listen and ensure two-way dialogue to explore your audiences' needs and values first. Find similarities between the diversity of citizens requiring engagement. Root explorations of the climate crisis in participants' common and personal values. Ask what people care about, what they dislike and what makes them proud. Find out what matters to your audience and resonate with them on that basis. Engage strategies of social norming and move away from shaming effective climate action.

ENGAGES

NOTEWORTHY IMPACTS

Communicate about locally relevant, tangible and observable climate impacts (e.g. local flooding, drought, fodder crisis, etc.). Enable people to identify with an often abstract concept through stories about real people. Adapt examples to the specific context: geography, sector or organisation. Global impacts, however, are just as crucial to connect with a sense of justice and moral duty. Where possible, avoid one-dimensional financial cost framings. Instead try to focus on human and non-human impacts of inaction.

ACTION

Communication and citizen engagement on the climate crisis should be action-oriented. There should be a clear vision of how the communication intends to empower citizens to make positive changes in their lives and communities. Meet people where they are rather than expecting them to come to you. Support systems should be made available including, where feasible, access to funding, mentoring, tools for establishing community actions, dialogue and educational resources.

EMOTIONAL STORIES

Tell emotional and personal stories. Tangible stories of real people affected by the climate crisis (e.g. physically, emotionally, financially, etc.) are encouraged, as are stories about how families and communities are benefiting from climate action. More engaged discussion is likely to occur when the conversation includes considerations of distributional, social and intergenerational justice (e.g. the impact on our children's futures) as well as the impact on the economy and environment.

“Change must happen in every home, in every workplace and in every network which supports our lifestyle. This requires a very high level of engagement, buy-in and motivation...The process employed by the Citizens' Assembly shows potential for the National Dialogue on Climate Action (NDCA) to be developed as a new model of citizen engagement on climate change, with deliberation leading to action at its core”

Climate Action Plan, Government of Ireland, 2019, p135

For more information, including project methodology, visit:
<https://diarmuidtorney.org/climatecitizens-project/>

This project is funded under the EPA Research Programme 2014–2020. The EPA Research Programme is a Government of Ireland initiative funded by the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

DISCLAIMER: Although every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the material contained in this resource, complete accuracy cannot be guaranteed. Neither the Environmental Protection Agency nor the authors accept any responsibility whatsoever for loss or damage occasioned or claimed to have been occasioned, in part or in full, as a consequence of any person acting or refraining from acting, as a result of a matter contained in this resource.



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland

