



Participants listening to a lecture by an expert during the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in Budapest 2020

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**Photos: Fülöp Ildikó, DemNet Foundation**

## Abstract

In 2020 the City Council of Budapest invited locals to take part in the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in order to develop a climate strategy that matched people's lives and aspirations. This policy brief provides empirical evidence of how local governments can address the problems of climate change in cooperation with non-governmental organisations and randomly selected citizens. Beyond presenting the proposals accepted during the event, the brief will also analyse the extent of changes in participants' attitudes and knowledge about climate change. Finally, based on interviews with policy-makers, the brief also reflects on extent to which the citizens' proposals were included in the climate strategy of the city.

## About ICLD

The Swedish International Centre for Local Democracy (ICLD) is part of the Swedish development cooperation. The mandate of the organization is to contribute to poverty alleviation by strengthening local governments.

# Reducing the negative effects of climate change

Lessons from the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in Budapest

*Are citizens able to propose effective local initiatives to reduce the negative effects of climate change?*

## Introduction

The requirement to limit global warming to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels under the Paris Agreement puts specific demands on cities. They will need to become sinks for carbon and develop effective governance frameworks, including multi-level governance with participation from cities and urban areas, regions, industry, civil society, and scientific institutions. More intense and frequent heatwaves will increase heat-related illnesses (asthma, cardiovascular diseases, allergies, mental health) and deaths among residents, requiring cities to make efforts to mitigate the effects.

The Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in Budapest proved that well-informed, interested citizens are able to propose effective local initiatives and will support even inconvenient measures in the short and medium term, in recognition that their long-term interests and the wellbeing of children necessitate those efforts and compromises. As a result of the process, policy recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly the order of priority for interventions within the climate strategy for Budapest was modified.

## Deliberative democracy and environmental issues

Environmental issues have long been an area of concern for critical forms of deliberative democracy. New research evidence (Dryzek-Niemeyer, 2019) stresses the importance of deliberative and participatory processes in tackling the ecological crisis. Earlier research focused on procedures that seek to involve ordinary citizens in deliberation (Goodin, 2008; Smith, 2009). As those procedures took shape in various forms (Fung, 2007) and involved many different actors, theoretical development and empirical research showed that opening up the political system to more systematic participation and deliberation by citizens could contribute to strengthening liberal democracies (Geissel and Newton, 2012).

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Participants discussing the topic at the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in Budapest 2020

## Citizen Assemblies can be effective tools to combat climate change because:

1. tailored information and feedback provision can enhance an individual's motivation to act
2. including citizens' perspectives on climate change can contribute to simple, practical policy-making
3. such policies can help to accelerate and scale up climate action

By prioritising the common good over self-interest, the deliberative approach of citizens' assemblies can lead to support for ambitious climate policy solutions. For example, the Irish Constitutional Convention discussed nine policy areas including climate change and decided on 13 policy recommendations that were 'significantly more radical than many expected' (Muradova, Walker and Colli, 2020).

As a further example, in October 2019, as part of France's 'Great National Debate', the French President Emmanuel Macron invited 150 citizens to formulate proposals for fighting climate change. Discussed and amended during an eight-month deliberative democracy process, participants came up with 149 proposals. The process had an effect on the methods of French legislation: since the debate, 'soft law' procedures are used to seek cooperation of interested parties (Delooz, 2021). In June 2019, the United Kingdom (UK) Government and Parliament passed a law committing the UK to reaching net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. Commissioned by six Select Committees of the House of Commons, members of the Climate Assembly UK agreed to 25 underpinning principles and 50 recommendations for policy measures to achieve a balance between the amount of greenhouse gas emissions produced and the amount removed from the atmosphere. In light of these earlier findings, the study on the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in Budapest aimed to reveal how much the debate process has increased participants' knowledge on climate change, how they evaluated the process, and to what extent the municipality was able to integrate those recommendations into its climate strategy.

## Method

Citizens' Assemblies are subject to increasingly sophisticated empirical analysis as they allow for reliable analysis of the effects of deliberation (Setälä and Smith, 2018: 306). Self-reporting in surveys (including pre- and post-test design) was used with the aim of measuring both participants' knowledge about climate change (Figure 1) and their evaluation of the deliberative process (Table 1). In order to include organisers' and politicians' opinions about the process, five semi-structured interviews were conducted between 30 June and 30 October 2020 (Oross, Mátyás and Gherghina, 2021). The Budapest Climate Assembly was initiated by

## Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in Budapest

Held in September 2020, 50 randomly selected citizens were invited to discuss with politicians, experts and leaders of different NGOs about climate change and how the municipality of Budapest can address it. Participants discussed this with one another, and then made recommendations about what should happen. The Assembly provided an unprecedented opportunity for the public to contribute to the climate change debate, and to influence the action of the City Council.

**People left the room saying ‘I actually did not know about this, and you should do much more communication and education about climate change.’** (Advisor to the Mayor of Budapest on Citizen Participation)

a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) and the timing of the event was set according to the policy needs of the City Council (because it was working on updating its climate strategy).

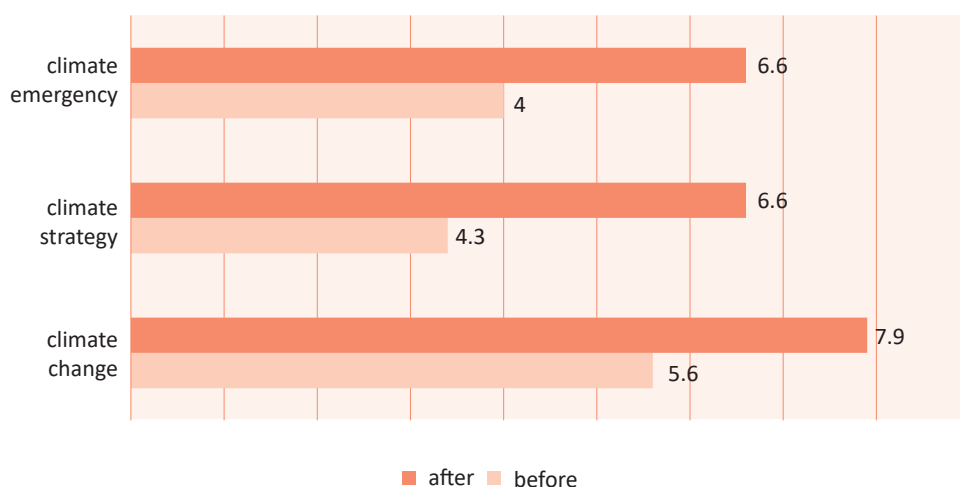
The documentary analysis focused on the draft of the climate strategy of Budapest and on documents (reports, presentations) that were circulated among participants of the process.

## Results

Participants of the Citizens' Assembly were invited to make recommendations for the city's climate strategy. During the first weekend, 11 experts presented key topics, and facilitators encouraged citizens to discuss the consequences and challenges of climate change for urban dwellers. Participants formed seven working groups and made a total of 21 proposals. They evaluated the proposals in plenary by the end of the first day of the second weekend. After the evaluation, the 11 most supported proposals were edited by leading experts, and similar proposals were merged to obtain eight coherent proposals. To conclude the process, participants prioritised those eight policy proposals, forming the final package of proposals.

The surveys conducted among participants before and after the event shed light on the positive effect of deliberation on participants' knowledge about climate change, about the reasons why Budapest declared a climate emergency, and about the city's climate strategy. Participants said that they felt more informed about these issues after the event (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1:** Survey among citizens before and after the Citizen Assembly. Rating how informed they feel about ... (N=37, 1 to 10 scale, mean values)





Participants writing policy recommendations at the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in Budapest 2020

### Recommendations of the Citizens' Assembly in Budapest:

1. Develop Energy Conservation Programmes for Buildings (94%)
2. Increase number of green spaces (94%)
3. Tailor public transport to urban growth needs (91%)
4. Hold media campaign on climate change (90%)
5. Construct climate-friendly experimental streets (90%)
6. Restrict downtown vehicle traffic (88%)
7. Run projects on better use of rainwater (85%)
8. Take measures to stop climate-damaging projects (75%)

***'These eight proposals change the order of priority for interventions within the climate strategy.'***

(Counsellor, Department of Climate and Environment)

All participants took part in the deliberation process without external coercion. Participants felt that they had an equal opportunity to speak and participate in the discussion, and that participants listened to each other during the discussion. On those two points, the average opinion was remarkably high, at 9.8 out of a maximum of 10 points, and there was not much variance among participants. The openness and compassion of the participants was also highly valued and agreed. In contrast, access to information on ideas showed a greater variance, with some expressing dissatisfaction, but overall, the average response rate was positive here as well (8 out of 10).

**Table 1:** Distributions of Variables Measuring Assembly Members' Perceptions of Deliberative Quality

	Obs.	Mean	SD	Min*	Max*
Participants were willing to listen to each other	19	9.3	1.09	9	10
Other members' contributions to the conversation were respectful	19	9.2	1.11	6	10
The participants were given an equal opportunity to participate and speak in the conversations	19	9.9	0.31	9	10
Participants were granted access to all information	19	8.6	1.53	5	10
Participants were able to participate without any external coercion	19	9.9	0.22	9	10
Communication was good among organisers and participants	18	9.7	0.48	9	100

**\*Note:** The items range from 1 (do not agree at all) to 10 (completely agree).



## Discussion questions for local governments

1. In your municipality, when planning a Citizens' Assembly, which stage of the planning and executing process do you think would benefit the most from cooperating with NGOs?
2. Do you know any groups that are under-represented in local decision-making? What incentives can be used to make participation more appealing to the members of these groups?
3. Sustaining the enthusiasm of citizens over two weekends was challenging for the organisers of the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change in Budapest. Do you have experiences and/or good practices (e.g. use of infotainment, nudges) regarding that type of challenge?
4. Some citizens are more informed and skilled than others, therefore they can come up with more proposals than other members. How do you think the process can reflect not only the equality of participants, but also the equity of their proposals?
5. What resources do you have at your disposal to organise a climate citizens' assembly?

## Recommendations for local policymakers

The Citizens' Assembly in Budapest provided learning that is useful for other local governments in how to involve citizens in decision-making to tackle environmental issues.

- Involve an NGO in organising the citizens' assembly. Working with NGOs to find the topic and to help word the main question to be debated in the assembly turned out to be important, as this enabled citizens to join in the debate more easily. It was also helpful for the municipality to communicate the focal points of their policy plans to lay people.
- Invite a variety of experts and promote knowledge-sharing. The survey showed that participating in the Citizen's Assembly increased participants' knowledge about climate change and strategies. The study shows that the citizens were able to come up with well-informed suggestions based on long-term interests.
- Careful monitoring of applications to participate is required to ensure a diverse group. In the case of Budapest, some groups (e.g. well-educated people) were over-represented among applicants; involving vulnerable groups in the process required special attention.
- In order to enable participants to come up with clear recommendations, organisers need to:
  1. explain how municipal decision-making works;
  2. communicate clearly about the mandate of the assembly;
  3. involve professional facilitators who can help citizens to understand better both the topic and each other in order to reach a consensus.

## Conclusions

During the event, the citizens gained knowledge about climate change; they were willing to actively take part in the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change; and they were able to form policy recommendations to the climate strategy of Budapest. The study shows that (i) the Citizens' Assembly on Climate Change is an appropriate tool to inform citizens and get them interested in the topic; and (ii) citizens are able to support even inconvenient measures in the short and medium term, recognising that their long-term interests and the wellbeing of children necessitate those efforts and compromises. The package of proposals that has been developed for Budapest were integrated into the city's climate strategy. Resources of the City Municipality were used to implement the climate strategy.

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