

**#02** IOPD  
Peer Learning Note

# Citizens' assembly & deliberative processes

Lessons from the 2024 IOPD Peer Learning Sessions



## Acknowledgments

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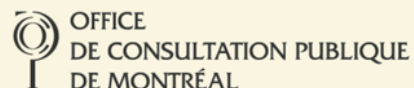
### About the IOPD

The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) is an international network open to all cities, organisations and research centres interested in learning about, exchanging and applying experiences of participatory democracy at the local level. It was founded in 2001 within the framework of the European Commission's URB-AL program for decentralised cooperation and its official constitution was in November 2001 in Barcelona, during the 1st IOPD Conference. Since 2006 it has been part of the world organisation of United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

### About UCLG

United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) is an umbrella international organisation for cities, LRGs, and municipal associations throughout the world that is concerned with representing and defending the interests of local governments on the world stage.

This publication has been coordinated and realised by the Technical Secretariat of the IOPD, financed by:





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## » Introduction

The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD) with the support of the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Learning team has organised in March and April 2024 the **IOPD Peer Learning Sessions, a series of online encounters between local and regional governments with the objective to share their municipal experiences and deepen the practices of citizen participation.** Some of these practices have put the focus on citizen assemblies and other deliberative processes.

As laboratories of democracy, **local and regional governments serve as fertile ground for experimenting with innovative approaches to citizen engagement and participatory decision-making.** In this context, citizens' assemblies and deliberative processes emerge as powerful tools for revitalising local democracy, empowering communities, and fostering inclusive governance. This peer learning note explores the application of these mechanisms in the local and regional context, highlighting their key elements, characteristics, and transformative potential.

## Methodology

The methodology for the peer-learning activity consisted of the introduction of the local authority, to present the context with supporting the information to build the case and justify the relevance of the implementation of democratic participation. Then, **the participants explained about the realisation of citizens' assemblies and deliberative committees in their context,** in most cases, it was a chronological development of the experience. Finally, they shared lessons learned and policy recommendations that resulted from the experience.

The sessions we analysed in this analytical note were held on:

- 7 March: with the city of Lisbon
- 10 April: with the cities of Bogota, Brussels and Milan.



## Citizens' assemblies & deliberative processes: Pathways towards meaningful civic engagement and collective decision-making

A deliberative process refers to a method of decision-making where individuals or groups engage in careful discussion, consideration of various perspectives, and evaluation of evidence before reaching a conclusion or making a decision. It's about thoughtful and reasoned dialogue aimed at reaching consensus or informed choices on public issues.

A citizen assembly is a specific form of deliberative process where a group of citizens, typically randomly selected to be representative of the population, come together to deliberate on a particular issue or set of issues. These assemblies often involve facilitated discussions, expert presentations, and sometimes even voting to make recommendations or decisions. The goal is to ensure that the decisions made are reflective of the broader public's values, concerns, and interests, rather than being dominated by special interests or partisan politics. Citizen assemblies are often used in democratic contexts to address complex or contentious issues where traditional decision-making processes might be inadequate.

By providing a space for a multiplicity of voices and needs, citizens' assemblies and deliberative processes are beacons of hope, illuminating pathways towards meaningful civic engagement and collective decision-making.

### Origins of Deliberative Processes and Citizens' Assemblies

The origins of deliberative processes and citizens' assemblies can be traced back to ancient democratic practices, where citizens gathered to discuss and decide on matters of collective concern. However, the contemporary resurgence of these methods can be attributed to a growing recognition of the limitations of traditional representative democracy and a desire for more inclusive and participatory decision-making processes.

Local and regional governments have been at the forefront of experimenting with deliberative democracy as a means to enhance citizen engagement and legitimacy in decision-making. These governments often face issues that directly affect their communities, such as urban planning, environmental policies, and social services. In response to the complexities of these issues and the diverse needs of their constituents, local and regional authorities have increasingly turned to deliberative processes to involve citizens directly in the decision-making process.



## Characteristics of Deliberative Processes

Deliberative processes encompass a broader spectrum of democratic practices that prioritise **reasoned discourse, civic engagement, and collaborative decision-making**. While citizens' assemblies represent one form of deliberative process, other modalities, such as deliberative polling, citizen juries, and participatory budgeting, also exemplify this approach.

Key characteristics of deliberative processes include:

- **Inclusion:** Deliberative processes aim to **include diverse voices and perspectives in the decision-making process**, transcending traditional barriers of class, race, gender, and socioeconomic status. By ensuring the participation of marginalised and underrepresented groups, these processes strive for greater equity and social justice.
- **Informative Context:** Deliberative processes provide participants with access to relevant information, expert analysis, and educational resources to enhance their understanding of the issues under consideration. This informative context **empowers citizens to make informed decisions and critically evaluate policy options**.
- **Dialogue and Exchange:** Central to deliberative processes is the cultivation of meaningful dialogue and exchange among participants. Through facilitated discussions, citizens engage in **respectful debate, challenge assumptions, and explore differing viewpoints, fostering mutual understanding and empathy**.
- **Reflection and Deliberation:** Deliberative processes prioritise reflection and deliberation **over hasty decision-making or partisan rhetoric**. Participants are encouraged to weigh the pros and cons of different policy proposals, consider the long-term implications, and envision collective solutions that serve the common good.
- **Impact and Follow-Up:** Deliberative processes aspire to translate deliberative outcomes into tangible policy changes or actionable recommendations. Through mechanisms for feedback, monitoring, and follow-up, these processes seek to **ensure that citizen input is taken seriously by decision-makers and integrated into governance structures**.



## Key Elements of Citizens' Assemblies

- **Random Selection:** Citizens' assemblies rely on random selection methods to **ensure the diverse representation of citizens from various demographic backgrounds**. This random selection process mitigates the influence of vested interests and political biases, fostering a more inclusive and representative decision-making body.
- **Deliberative Process:** Central to the functioning of citizens' assemblies is the deliberative process, wherein participants engage in **informed and respectful dialogue**, exchange diverse perspectives, and weigh the merits of different arguments. Through facilitated discussions, citizens have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of complex issues and explore potential solutions collaboratively.
- **Expert Input:** While citizens' assemblies prioritise the voices of ordinary citizens, taking into account their valuable knowledge and experiences, they often incorporate expert input to **accompany these processes with factual information, technical expertise, and policy analysis**. Expert testimonies serve to enrich deliberations, offering valuable insights and contextualising complex issues for assembly participants.
- **Consensus Building:** Citizens' assemblies aspire to reach consensus or near-consensus recommendations through dialogue, compromise, and mutual understanding. While unanimity may not always be achievable, **the goal of consensus-building fosters a sense of ownership and legitimacy among assembly participants**, enhancing the credibility of their recommendations.



## Goals of Citizens' Assemblies and Deliberative Processes

- **Enhancing Democratic Legitimacy:** Citizen assemblies and deliberative processes seek to enhance the legitimacy of democratic governance by **empowering ordinary citizens to actively participate in decision-making**. By involving diverse stakeholders in the deliberative process, these mechanisms foster a sense of ownership and accountability, thereby strengthening the democratic foundations of society.
- **Fostering Informed Decision-Making:** One of the primary goals of citizens' assemblies and deliberative processes is to promote informed decision-making **through dialogue and mutual understanding, evidence-based analysis, and public dialogue**. By providing participants with access to factual information and expert input, these mechanisms enable citizens to make informed choices that reflect the public interest.
- **Building Social Cohesion:** Citizen assemblies and deliberative processes serve as forums for bridging social divides and **fostering dialogue across ideological, cultural, and socioeconomic lines**. By creating spaces for constructive engagement and mutual respect, these mechanisms contribute to building social cohesion and fostering a sense of solidarity within diverse communities.
- **Strengthening Civic Engagement:** Another key goal of citizens' assemblies and deliberative processes is to promote active citizenship and civic engagement among ordinary citizens. By providing opportunities for meaningful participation in the democratic process, these mechanisms **empower individuals to become agents of change, contributing to the vitality and resilience of civil society**.
- **Advancing Policy Innovation:** Citizens' assemblies and deliberative processes offer platforms for **exploring innovative policy solutions to complex societal challenges**. By harnessing the collective wisdom and creativity of citizens, these mechanisms generate fresh perspectives, creative ideas, and novel approaches to addressing pressing issues, thereby advancing policy innovation and social progress.

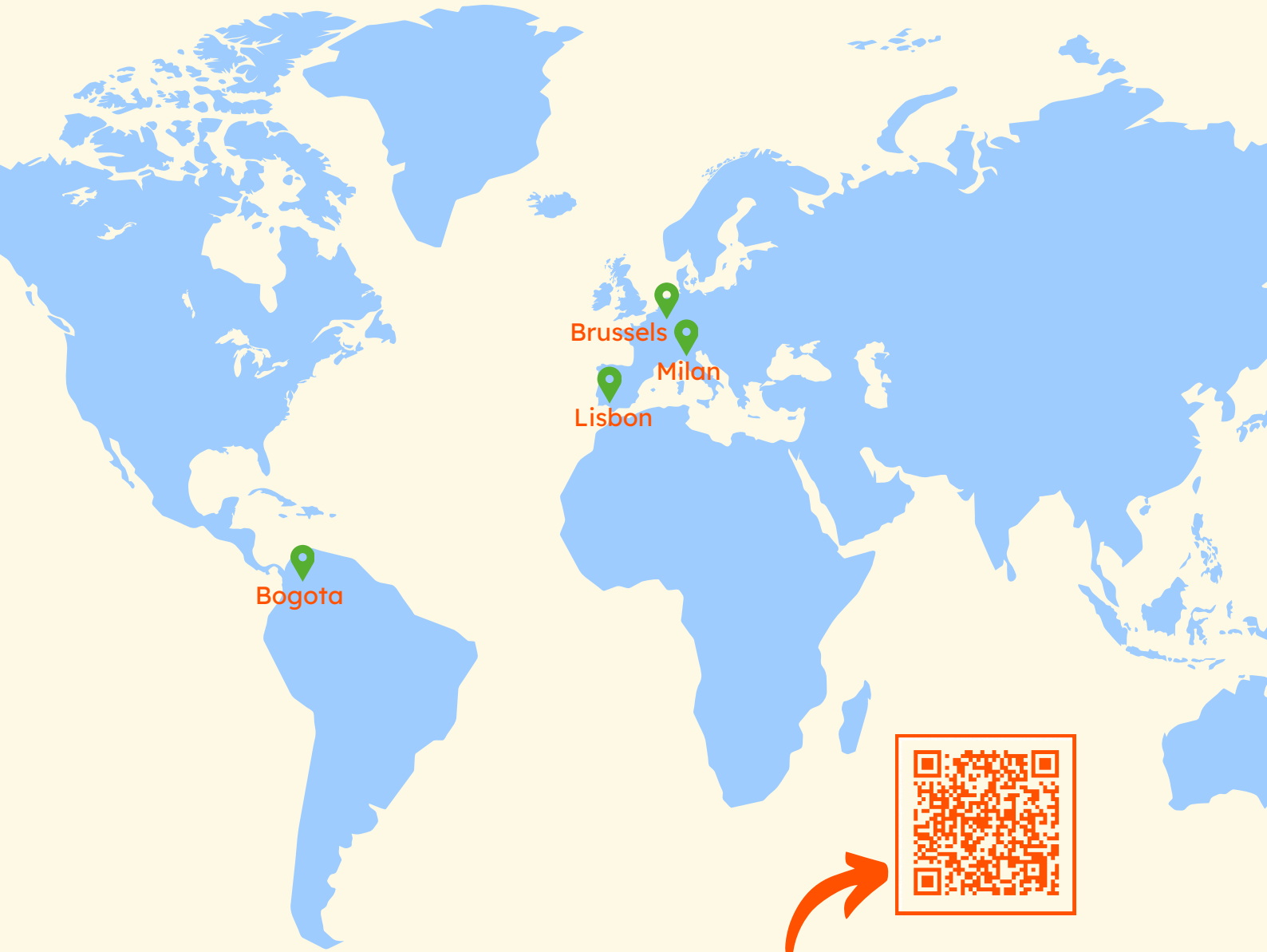


In an era marked by growing distrust of traditional forms of politics and governance, citizen assemblies and deliberative processes emerge as promising models for revitalising democracy and reimagining civic engagement. By embracing principles of inclusivity, deliberation, and civic empowerment, these mechanisms offer a pathway towards a more vibrant, responsive, and participatory democratic society. As we continue to navigate the complexities of the 21st century, let us harness the transformative potential of citizen assemblies and deliberative processes to forge a future where the voices of all citizens are heard, valued, and empowered to shape the destiny of our shared communities.





# Cases presented in the IOPD Peer Learning Sessions



Scan or click on this QR code to access the video recordings of the sessions in the IOPD YouTube Channel



## Lisbon (Portugal)

Lisbon comprises 24 Parish Councils, housing a total population of 545,796 inhabitants. In the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, spanning 18 municipalities and covering 3.3% of the territory, **reside three million people, constituting a quarter of the region's population, with 25% of the working population.**



The Lisbon Citizens Council operates to achieve three primary goals: **creating a platform for deliberation and collaborative proposal development for the city, bridging the gap between citizens and decision-makers, and enhancing the efficacy of municipal executive decisions by integrating citizen input and tailoring policies to their needs.**

Participation is open to residents from Lisbon aged 16 and older. In 2024, the dedicated platform registered over 1,000 participants. The process entails **direct engagement with a diverse range of municipal and external services during meetings and activities**, resulting in proposals spanning various domains, along with internal and external evaluation reports.

In its third iteration in 2024, the Lisbon Citizens Council follows a structured timeline:

- **Phase 1: Theme selection** from the major options in the Lisbon City Plan.
- **Phase 2: Registration**, involving Lisbon residents through a stratified sampling model and random selection process, ensuring representation of the city's population.
- **Phase 3: Drawing**, and facilitating dynamic debates on the chosen theme to formulate citizens' proposals for the Lisbon City Council.
- **Phase 4: Sessions**, providing a platform for informed discussions aimed at presenting citizens' proposals to the Lisbon City Council.
- **Phase 5: Post-Council Meetings**, involving analysis and development of proposals in collaboration with Lisbon City Council Services and citizens.

The Lisbon Citizens Council has been **an opportunity for residents to dialogue and have a say on vital local topics for the municipality, such as climate change challenges, the 15 Minute City and**

“How to build a Lisbon that cares,” addressing the most urgent needs, such as housing, health, immigration, homelessness and intergenerational solidarity.

### Lessons learnt:

- Importance of direct involvement of a diversity of municipal and external services during the preparation of meetings and activities.
- To guarantee the impartiality of the process, the selection and the evaluation must be conducted by external entities.



## Brussels (Belgium)

Brussels has a population of 1.2 million people spread across 19 districts and holds the esteemed status of being the Capital of Europe, it is also the capital of both the region of Flanders and the French Speaking Community. It is recognised as the second most cosmopolitan city globally and has the distinction of being **the first city to implement a permanent mixed assembly and a permanent climate assembly.**



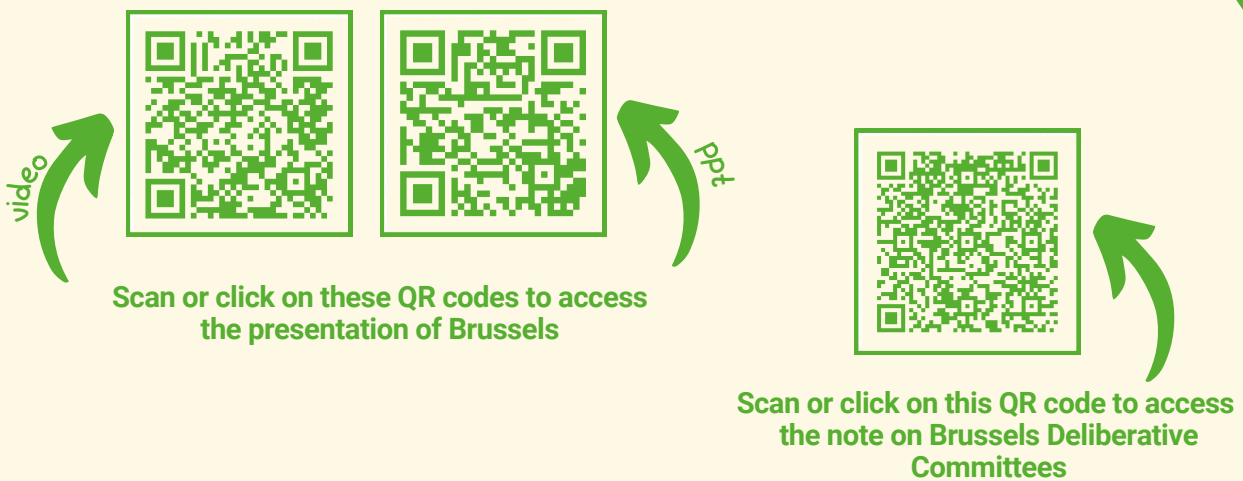
The Brussels Deliberative Committees (*Commissions Délibératives* in French) were established in 2020, marking the inception of **the first Parliament globally with permanent mixed committees.** Designed over a year, these committees consist of a blend of majority and opposition members, as well as experts who provide insights during hearings. The composition includes 15 Members of the Parliament (MPs) and 45 citizens. The participant citizens are randomly selected from a pool of 10,000 individuals, aged 16 or older, who may be Belgian or non-Belgian residents.

**Comprising six deliberative committees, this innovative system allows for topics to be proposed by both citizens and MPs.** If a citizen-proposed topic is rejected, MPs must provide justifications for their decision. The deliberative committee process involves gathering information on the topic, engaging in small group deliberations, formulating recommendations, and voting on them, involving both MPs and citizens.

The final phase entails follow-up within six to nine months, during which the government and parliament present actions taken for each voted recommendation. MPs involved in the deliberative committees are tasked with overseeing this follow-up process. **Citizens participate in deliberating on the measures taken and provide feedback during the plenary session.**

## Lessons learnt

- Citizen participation must be seen as an evolutionary process.
- The involvement of the administration is a key element of a process's success.
- MP's participation is an added value, that contributes to strengthening the link between the administration and citizens.



## Bogotá (Colombia)

Bogota, the capital city of Colombia, has a vibrant population of over seven million residents, making it the largest city in Colombia. Spanning an area of approximately 1,587 square kilometres, it is a sprawling metropolis renowned for its rich cultural heritage, diverse neighbourhoods, and bustling urban life.. The city is administered as the Capital District, however, it is a territorial entity of the first order, with the same administrative status as the departments of Colombia. As the economic and political heart of Colombia, **Bogota serves as a hub for commerce, innovation, and creativity.**



In 2020, the Bogota City Council launched the Itinerant Citizens' Assembly (ICA) through its public innovation lab, Demolab, marking a significant milestone as **Colombia's first Citizens' Assembly and one of the earliest instances of deliberative mini-publics in Latin America.** Recognised by the OECD as one of only eight instances of institutionalisation in global deliberative democracy, the ICA is a standout representation of the Global South, characterised by a mixed governance model and a membership of 240 individuals.

The ICA operates through five distinct phases: prioritisation, citizen recruitment, training, deliberation, and the subsequent organisation and promotion of outcomes. These phases are further subdivided into various "chapters," each with specific aims, such as exploring objectives, formulating policies, and evaluating effectiveness, all **contributing to a cumulative learning process.**

By 2023, Chapter III of the ICA comprised 70 members, selected through a combination of lottery (65%), itinerant (20%), and registration-based (15%) methods, with a primary focus on evaluating policies. Notably, **70% of Council members acknowledged implementing more than a quarter of citizens' recommendations, while 79.6% of participants reported increased trust and improved perceptions of the Council, and 63.3% expressed greater involvement in urban issues.**

The consistent integration of the ICA into the Council's strategic action plan for four consecutive years underscores its **enduring significance and its profound impact on local governance.**

## Lessons learnt:

- Citizen's Assemblies do not have a single design.
- The commitment of the institutions is key, they must understand and accept to give up a little of their power.
- Politics shapes the world, and the point is to learn and understand how to use it to the benefit of the general interest.



Scan or click on this QR code to access the presentation of Bogotá's Itinerant Citizens' Assembly



Scan or click on these QR codes to access the website of Bogotá's Itinerant Citizens' Assembly



## Milan (Italia)

The Municipality of Milan has around 1.4 million residents, including roughly 300,000 foreigners, ranking as Italy's **second most populous city after Rome**. Covering 181.8 square kilometres, Milan is divided into 40 neighbourhoods grouped into 9 zones (Municipi).



With the objectives of **reducing CO<sup>2</sup> emissions by 2030, becoming a Carbon Neutral City by 2050 and tackling climate change challenges**, the Milan City Council approved, in February 2022, the Air and Climate Plan (Piano Aria e Clima - PAC). This outlines 49 actionable items organised into 5 key areas:

- **Area 1 - Healthy and inclusive Milan:** to foster a clean, equitable, accessible, and inclusive urban environment.
- **Area 2 - Connected and highly accessible Milan:** to promote sustainable, adaptable, active, and safe urban transportation.
- **Area 3 - Positive energy Milan:** to reduce and optimise energy consumption.
- **Area 4 - Cooler Milan:** to move towards a greener, more temperate, and habitable city, adaptable to climate fluctuations.
- **Area 5 - Conscious Milan:** to encourage the adoption of eco-conscious lifestyles.

The "Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate" initiative was initiated within PAC's Area 5. This initiative sets up an ongoing civic engagement platform aimed at **providing citizens with a space to have a say on climate change mitigation, air quality enhancement, and ecological transition endeavours until 2030**.



This process unfolds in three distinct phases:

- **Phase 0:** Formation of the Citizens' Group.
- **Phase 1:** Launch of the Pilot year of the Permanent Assembly in 2023.
- **Phase 2:** Implementation of full-scale activities of the Permanent Assembly in 2024.

The assembly comprises **90 newly selected citizens annually, drawn by lot to represent the city's diverse population**. Closed collaboration with the municipality is promoted to ensure the inclusion of citizens' recommendations and suggestions in Milan's PAC.

## Lessons learnt:

- A plurality of voices in providing information and education on the Assembly topics is a key requirement to ensure a full understanding of the topics and broaden the vision of the issues.
- The youngest bracket (16-20) is hard to involve.
- Bringing together a diversity of voices highlights the linguistic and relational difficulties encountered as a result of different social backgrounds. The administration must adapt and work on it.



Scan or click on these QR codes to access the presentation of Milan



Scan or click on this QR code to access the website of Milan's Permanent Citizens' Assembly on Climate



# Key lessons and recommendations

## 1. Clear objectives

Define clear objectives and goals for the citizen assembly or deliberative process. What issues are being addressed? What outcomes are desired? Having clear objectives will guide the entire process.

## 2. Random selection

Use random selection methods to ensure the assembly or participants represent a diverse cross-section of the population. This helps in avoiding bias and ensures inclusivity.

## 3. Facilitation

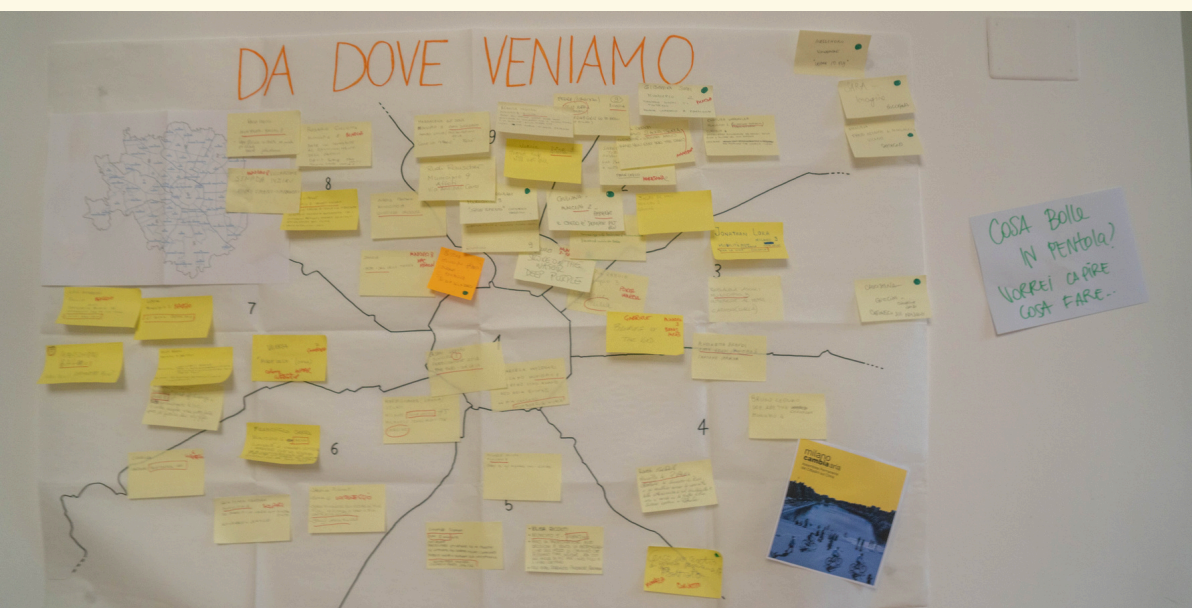
Employ skilled facilitators to guide discussions and ensure productive and respectful dialogue. Facilitators should be neutral and adept at managing group dynamics, overall amid a diversity of participants' backgrounds.

## 4. Education and information

Provide participants with balanced and comprehensive information on the issues being discussed. This could include expert presentations, background materials, and access to relevant data.

## 5. Structured deliberation

Design structured deliberation processes that allow participants to explore different perspectives, weigh evidence, and engage in constructive dialogue. This could include small group discussions, plenary sessions, and deliberative exercises.



## 6. Time and resources

Allocate sufficient time and resources for the process. Deliberation takes time, so ensure participants have enough opportunities to engage deeply with the issues.

## 7. Accessibility

Make the process accessible to all participants, including those with disabilities or language barriers. Provide accommodations such as translation services, accessible venues, and support for participation.

## 8. Follow-up and feedback

Develop mechanisms for follow-up and feedback to ensure that outcomes and recommendations are taken seriously by policymakers. This could involve public hearings, reports, or ongoing engagement with stakeholders.

## 9. Transparency

Maintain transparency throughout the process, including clear communication about the selection criteria, decision-making procedures, and outcomes. Transparency builds trust and legitimacy.

## 10. Evaluation

Evaluate the process to assess its impact, effectiveness, and areas for improvement. This could involve gathering feedback from participants, analysing outcomes, and soliciting input from stakeholders.



## Resources

- Innovative Citizen Participation and New Democratic Institutions. Catching the Deliberative Wave. OECD <https://www.oecd.org/gov/innovative-citizen-participation-and-new-democratic-institutions-339306da-en.htm>
- Eight ways to institutionalise deliberative democracy. OECD <https://www.oecd.org/fr/gov/gouvernement-ouvert/eight-ways-to-institutionalise-deliberative-democracy.htm>
- Report on Deliberative Democracy. European Committee on Democracy and Governance (CDDG) / Council of Europe: <https://rm.coe.int/report-on-deliberative-democracy-eng/1680aaf76f>
- People Powered: citizens' assemblies <https://www.peoplepowered.org/citizens-assemblies>
- Participedia: citizen's assembly <https://participedia.net/method/4258>
- Citizens' Assembly of Scotland: research report <https://www.gov.scot/publications/research-report-citizens-assembly-scotland/documents/>

### Explore more

- Authoritarianism and Deliberative Democracy: Responding to Our Current Political Times and Contexts. Timothy J. Shaffer and Laura W. Black. <https://oidp.net/en/publication.php?id=1533>
- From deliberative to radical democracy? Sortition and politics in the 21st century. Yves Sintomer. <https://oidp.net/en/publication.php?id=1431>
- Gender Difference in Willingness and Capacity for Deliberation. Afsoun Afsahi. <https://academic.oup.com/sp/article/28/4/1046/5760332>

### Papers & publications

- "Democracy in Motion: Evaluating the Practice and Impact of Deliberative Civic Engagement" edited by Tina Nabatchi, John Gastil, G. Michael Weiksner, and Matt Leighninger. This book offers a comprehensive overview of the theory, practice, and impact of deliberative democracy, including citizen assemblies.
- "Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century" edited by John Gastil and Peter Levine. This handbook provides practical guidance

and case studies on implementing deliberative processes, including citizen assemblies, in various contexts.

- "The Deliberative Democracy Handbook: Strategies for Effective Civic Engagement in the 21st Century" edited by John Gastil and Peter Levine. This book offers insights into the theory and practice of deliberative democracy, including citizen assemblies, with contributions from leading scholars and practitioners in the field.
- "The Promise and Peril of Participatory Policy Making: A Comparative Study" by John S. Dryzek. This paper explores the promise and challenges of participatory policy-making processes, including citizen assemblies, through a comparative analysis of case studies from around the world.
- "When the People Speak: Deliberative Democracy and Public Consultation" by James S. Fishkin. This book examines the theory and practice of deliberative democracy, including the use of citizen assemblies and other forms of public consultation, to enhance democratic decision-making.
- "The Deliberative Turn in Democratic Theory" edited by John S. Dryzek and Bonnie Honig. This collection of essays explores the rise of deliberative democracy as a theoretical framework and its implications for democratic governance, including the role of citizen assemblies.
- "The Good Representative" by Ian Shapiro. This book examines the role of political representatives in deliberative democracies, including their relationship to citizen assemblies and other forms of participatory decision-making.
- "Democratic Innovations: Designing Institutions for Citizen Participation" edited by Graham Smith. This volume examines various democratic innovations, including citizen assemblies, and their potential to enhance citizen participation and democratic legitimacy.
- "Empowered Participation: Reinventing Urban Democracy" by Archon Fung. This book examines the practice of participatory democracy in urban settings, including the use of citizen assemblies and other forms of deliberative decision-making, to empower citizens and enhance urban governance.



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