



A transition for the citizens? Ensuring public participation in the European Green Deal

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The EU acknowledges that citizen participation in the European Green Deal is vital to ensure the legitimacy of policies and public buy-in for climate measures. This policy brief examines specific options for public participation in policymaking – stakeholder consultation, citizens’ assemblies and local projects – and discusses the extent to which each is already included in the European Green Deal. Although the most effective public participation takes place at national, regional or local level, it should nonetheless be encouraged or coordinated by the EU. Currently, the mechanisms established by the EU appear to blend different types of public participation; however, a key issue that remains to be addressed is reaching groups that may otherwise be overlooked or fall through the cracks – particularly those with the most to lose in the transition.

INTRODUCTION

15 months after the launch of the European Green Deal, the policies proposed in the Commission’s communication are starting to take shape: from the Just Transition Mechanism and the EU Climate Law, to the Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies. In the process of putting these strategies into legislation, however, a key question that remains is how citizens

will be able to participate in the Green Deal. Recent movements such as Fridays for Future and mass climate marches across Europe pre-coronavirus have demonstrated the public pressure for stringent climate policies, and public and stakeholder inclusion has been shown to be an essential aspect to ensure social buy-in and coherence between local and EU policy priorities.¹ The Commission itself explicitly committed to ensuring public participation in the European Green Deal, highlighting in its communication that, ‘*Game-changing policies only work if citizens are fully involved in designing them... Citizens are and should remain a driving force of the transition*’.² Along these lines, the EU itself put forward a [call for projects](#) investigating ‘European capacities for citizen deliberation and participation in the Green Deal’ in its Horizon 2020 framework program, which received 1550 applications. But to what extent do the current participatory mechanisms contribute to this goal?

WHY DO WE NEED PUBLIC PARTICIPATION?

A key argument for including stakeholders and the public in policymaking is that this can improve the democratic legitimacy of policies by ensuring that multiple points of view are taken into account. Particularly in the EU, long considered to be removed from citizens and suffer from a democratic deficit, increasing direct public participation – in addition to ensuring representation through parliaments at national and EU level – is thereby argued to make the

polymaking process more legitimate. Although opening up polymaking to the public may not be fully without risks – in the sense that it also gives a voice to radical or anti-democratic voices – opening up polymaking systems more thoroughly may also reduce the risk of such counter-movements, as citizens are more directly aware of and able to participate in issues that they care about. In practical terms, well-organised consultations and discussions with a range of stakeholders and the public can increase buy-in on a policy and avoid public backlash. This is not only because the policy output is more likely to take public concerns into account, but also because those consulted can gain a sense of ownership through participation.

Both of these points are particularly important when discussing climate change. A just transition requires protecting and assisting communities most affected by the transition. This makes it important to include diverse perspectives into the policies that are created to support local communities in the transition, ensuring that unions and other civil society groups are included, as well as individuals themselves. It is by now a truism to point to experiences such as the *Gilets Jaunes* movement in France as evidence of the risk of introducing policy measures to combat climate change without taking into local realities and pressures. Such a risk may be exacerbated for the EU, which already struggles with public perceptions that it is elite and out of touch with citizens in the member states. Public participation in polymaking is therefore important, and is currently implemented in three main ways in the EU:

1. Public consultations

Consultations are the main choice of participatory mechanism for the European Commission, as they are low cost to organise (particularly online) and can easily allow for answers from a range of groups. These days, some form of stakeholder or public consultation is carried out for every EU legislative proposal, in line with Art. 11 TEU and Protocol 2 on the application of the principles of subsidiarity and proportionality.³ When all goes well, non-governmental organisations

(NGOs) and civil society groups represent the public and act as ‘transmission belts’ for their members’ views, ensuring that a range of concerns are expressed. Of course, individuals are also able submit individual responses to the public consultations.

However, research shows that stakeholder consultations do not always allow for true public participation. Many public consultations do not reach a large enough public to elicit individual submissions, or ask questions that are too technical for ordinary citizens to answer. As a result, such fora are often dominated by better-resourced groups, including business organisations and larger NGOs, who are often further from the public. Moreover, stakeholder consultations often happen at too late a stage in the policy process to really affect the outcome.⁴ Stakeholder consultations therefore have the potential to signal different positions to the EU institutions, but are limited in the extent to which they can facilitate *public* participation.

2. Citizens’ assemblies

Throughout Europe, citizens’ assemblies are an increasingly popular method to approach complex climate change issues: from the Irish Citizens’ Assembly, which started in 2016, to the more recent UK and French Climate Assemblies. These fora allow regular citizens – usually chosen by lot and supposed to represent the broader population – to learn about, debate and discuss particular issues, and subsequently draft recommendations to be voted on in parliament. They are usually established for a limited amount of time to discuss one or more specific issues (although the Germanophone community of Belgium has incorporated a permanent citizens’ assembly into its parliament).

Citizens’ assemblies are supposed to facilitate public participation beyond the sub-section of the population that usually engages with and participates in politics, while also establishing a formal procedure that ensures that recommendations provided are usable. This, however, relies on the willingness of the formal political institutions to pay attention to and abide by the results. When this is not the case – most recently in the French

Citizens' Convention on the Climate⁵ - this can degrade trust in the process. The representativeness of many citizens' assemblies is also questionable, as they usually require a significant time contribution, which may limit the participation of certain sub-groups such as carers, parents, or those unable to take time off work.⁶ That said, if well designed and implemented, citizens' assemblies do have the potential to include citizens' views in political decision-making, providing insights into the needs and concerns of local populations in the transition.

3. Local projects

The final means for public participation is through participatory projects. These usually take place at local level, as direct public participation is the backbone of these projects. The local level has played an important role in the just transition in several EU countries. For instance, the German Coal Commission created possibilities for regional and local participation to share experiences about local transition projects.⁷ Mayors and regional stakeholders – particularly from coal-mining regions – could share their priorities, leading to a long list of potential projects in the final report and a prioritisation of regional actions based on these experiences.

Similarly, cities are also leading the way to climate neutrality, with different initiatives existing at city level, including the Covenant of Mayors, the Green Cities Accord and European Green Capital Cities.⁸ An independent expert report recommended in September 2020 that the European Commission initiate a mission to have 100 cities climate-neutral by 2030, 'by and for the cities'.⁹ Indeed, these local projects require citizens to participate fully in the process of transitioning away from fossil fuels, setting their own priorities and taking into account local features. The downside of such projects are evidently their limited geographic impact: they require scaling up or incorporation into broader policies in order to have large-scale impact.

WHAT PROVISIONS ARE ALREADY IN THE EUROPEAN GREEN DEAL?

The Just Transition Platform

In addition to the standard one-off stakeholder consultations held on each individual legislative proposal as part of the European Green Deal, the [Just Transition Platform](#) provides an example of a hybrid, ongoing form of public consultation. Launched on 29 June 2020, the Just Transition Platform aims to extend on the 'Initiative for Coal Regions in Transition', an already existing platform that connects stakeholders and provides technical expertise for transitioning away from coal. By providing information about resources and help in acquiring funding and starting projects, this existing network already provided for connections between the European Commission, national, regional and local administrations, and social partners from civil society, industry, unions and academia.

The Just Transition Platform builds on this initiative as it covers more than coal regions, also including 'carbon intensive regions'. The main goal of the Just Transition Platform – at least initially – is to help member states to draw up their territorial Just Transition Plans and thereby to access EU funding through the Just Transition Mechanism. The platform is eventually planned to consist of three main workstreams: a website to help actors to ask their technical and administrative questions to the Commission; project and expert databases to help with information sharing; and – most importantly for this discussion – a 'forum for dialogue on just transition involving local and national stakeholders, social partners, public authorities and EU institutions'.

The Just Transition Platform therefore seems to aim to build an ongoing dialogue among stakeholders at different levels, with the public represented by trade unions and civil society organisations. However, it is important to note that it is dependent on pre-existing projects on national and local level, as it aims to bring these projects together. Moreover, its links to the relatively narrowly defined Just Transition Mechanism may limit its potential for more expansive participation

– particularly if the Platform’s aims are about acquiring funding rather than co-creation of policies. It remains to be seen whether the Platform’s limited scope will be broadened once national plans are drawn up and the Just Transition Mechanism’s funding allocated.

The EU Climate Pact

The [EU Climate Pact](#), launched on 16 December 2020, also aims to create a network of projects and initiatives throughout the EU. It differs from the Just Transition Platform as it is not specifically about the just transition but about climate initiatives more generally. Its goal is to move beyond policies and laws and encourage concrete citizen actions, providing a platform to share ideas and best practices among ‘people across all walks of life’. It aims to both raise awareness and support specific actions.

So far, there have been three initiatives announced as part of the recently-launched Climate Pact. The first is ‘Climate Pact ambassadors’, who are supposed to raise awareness about the Climate Pact, reach out to people and organisations not yet taking climate action, ‘lead by example’ and bridge civil society, stakeholders and the Commission. The first ambassadors, who can be representatives of organisations or individuals, will be selected and announced in early 2021. This involves no funding, but ambassadors are provided with communication tools and access to the Climate Pact network. The second project involves a partnership with the global climate campaign [‘Count Us In’](#), where citizens can pledge to take different steps towards reducing their own carbon footprint (such as flying less, eating less meat, and talking to their politicians). A system for organisational ‘pledges’ will be established later this year, focusing on commitments that go beyond legislative requirements and aim towards measurable outcomes. Third, other individuals and organisations are encouraged to organise ‘satellite events’ for the Climate Pact, which can be public debates, conferences and workshops.

From its structure, the Climate Pact seems to represent something in between local projects and stakeholder participation, as – like the Just Transition Platform – it

mostly aggregates regional and local initiatives and organisations’ work. One question that remains to be answered is the added value of the Climate Pact compared to existing networks of projects such as Zero Waste Cities or networks of civil society organisations – particularly if EU funding for the Pact is limited. One potential way that the Climate Pact could build on these existing networks is by incorporating deliberative democratic initiatives. This has been specifically mentioned as a possibility on the Pact’s website: ‘Direct citizen consultations could be organised using formats such as citizen dialogues [and] citizen assemblies’, including potential links to existing initiatives such as the Covenant of Mayors or the CITIZENV dialogues with young people. This could also provide the basis for public conferences and assemblies as part of the Conference on the Future of Europe (see below).

The Conference on the Future of Europe

The Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) is not a specific measure announced under the European Green Deal, but in its Communication on the European Green Deal, the Commission promised to ‘ensure that the green transition features prominently in the debate on the future of Europe’.¹⁰ Potential problems with the CoFoE have been discussed in more detail by others¹¹ but the specific challenges regarding public participation are worth outlining briefly here. First, a key difficulty – as with EU action more generally – will be to reach citizens with lower levels of mobility, less knowledge of English, and less awareness of the EU. These citizens are often members of communities who will be most affected by climate change and by the transition, and it is therefore vital that they are able to provide their own input as well. Second, lessons learned from the previous Conventions and other participatory mechanisms such as the European Citizens’ Initiative show the importance of ensuring that there is a guarantee that the recommendations collected during the Conference will lead to actual policy change.

The CoFoE, if executed well, therefore has the strongest potential to allow public participation in terms of deliberative democracy – citizens’ assemblies

and dialogues – since this is the main goal of the Conference as a whole. However, the Joint Declaration signed on 10 March 2021 makes it seem unlikely that the design of the Conference will ensure true public participation. First, it has a very short timeframe: about 12 months from start to finish, not long enough to organise a citizens’ assembly or ‘interactive and creative forms of participation’,¹² even using digital platforms. Second, the complex structure of the Conference – with 6 different members of the Executive Board – make it unlikely to be easily understood by citizens not familiar with EU processes.¹³ Finally, the results of the CoFoE will be communicated in a non-binding report to the three EU institutions, each of which will examine how to follow up on the report. The non-binding nature of the recommendations may reduce public buy-in and legitimacy of the process, as well as citizen motivation to participate.

One point that still remains unclear is whether – or how – the CoFoE will be linked with the Climate Pact. They both tackle the issue of citizens engagement, but from different places: the Climate Pact essentially gathers bottom-up initiatives that are started within member states, while the Conference on the Future of Europe is a combination of top-down discussions and bottom-up, citizen-led initiatives. It therefore makes sense that they should be linked in some way to avoid duplication and wasted resources.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The outline of participation in the European Green Deal above shows that there is already some potential for the public to contribute to the EU’s climate policy. The EU appears to be using a range of options for public participation – from stakeholder consultation, to deliberative fora, and local projects – and also combining different types of participation under one label through the Just Transition Platform or the EU Climate Pact. Nonetheless, three questions arise from the above discussion that will need to be answered to ensure coherent, effective public participation in the European Green Deal.

1. Who are we trying to reach, and how can we get there?

The first question reflects a perennial problem for the EU: reaching and exchanging with people beyond already-committed EU supporters or people interested in political affairs. This will be a key challenge for all three participatory mechanisms and will require specific design choices to ensure that networks contribute to expanding local projects’ reach, and that a range of citizens are able to participate in the Conference on the Future of Europe.

Recommendations:

- i) Using a **variety of strategies for outreach** for the different participatory mechanisms. This includes making the most of online tools to reach different areas and populations, particularly younger people. Experience built up during the shift to online activities and events during the COVID-19 crisis could come in useful here. To reach people with less Internet access or technological know-how, local organisations such as NGOs, trade unions and local authorities can be used.
- ii) Focusing funding on developing local projects in countries or regions with fewer existing initiatives, in order to **avoid simply reinforcing** existing projects. Key regions could be established through a mapping activity of existing local projects, citizens’ dialogues and initiatives to find ‘weak spots’, and should also be prioritised based on need, measured through e.g. regional Just Transition Plans.

2. How can we structure the exchange and participation?

The EU’s focus on creating decentralised networks of local and regional projects, especially through the Climate Pact, increases the likelihood of including a range of actors and reduces the risk of failed forced ‘top-down’ participation. However, a key issue will be ensuring that the multitude of projects do not compete with each other for attention – and that there is added value in the EU coordinating these networks. This means that the initiatives should be designed to ensure that resources are efficiently used and that the lessons

learned from these local projects do feed into broader EU policies.

Recommendations:

iii) Ensure **coherence among the different EU participatory mechanisms**. For instance, the Climate Pact networks could be used to help facilitate outreach for the Conference on the Future of Europe, or implementation of the Conference itself.

iv) Ensure that there is **added value in the EU coordinating these networks** by ensuring that the EU Climate Pact and the Just Transition Platform contribute to sharing of best practices and practical improvements for the initiatives themselves. This may include, eventually, including funding lines or integrating lines of funding into the networks for cooperative projects (building on the link between the Just Transition Platform and the Just Transition Mechanism).

v) **Continue to develop partnerships with existing campaigns and networks** (such as Count Us In) to avoid duplication of tasks in structuring public participation and ensure efficient resource use.

3. How do we make the exchange count?

Finally, in addition to ensuring that the various EU initiatives are coherent, it is important to make sure that they also lead to concrete policy change and input. Otherwise, these participatory mechanisms risk becoming ‘window-dressing’, giving the impression of democratic legitimacy without really contributing to the policy process.

Recommendation:

vi). Ensure that **policy recommendations from the Conference on the Future of Europe** are binding, or at a minimum, require effective action from the EU institutions. Similarly, citizens’ assemblies at local level as part of the EU Climate Pact should also be able to be translated into concrete policy change, where relevant. Although this may be the most politically sensitive issue, it is also essential to avoid public

disillusionment with participatory processes at EU level.

The European Green Deal represents many challenges for the EU’s engagement with its citizens, but also an opportunity to take stock and design systems that can last into the future. It should be used to develop a concrete overview of the ways that the EU reaches out to its citizens, and to tie together and ensure coherence between them.

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Endnotes

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- ³ See European Commission (2017). Better Regulation Guidelines. Chapter VII : Guidelines on Stakeholder Consultation. Available at: <https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/better-regulation-guidelines-stakeholder-consultation.pdf>.
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