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IMPACT OF CITIZENS' ASSEMBLIES ON SOCIAL COHESION AND CLIMATE POLICY

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Overview

Climate action by governments at all levels is urgent, and public support of policies is crucial to their success. But at a time of high distrust in our political system and increasing community polarisation, getting buy-in from citizens on climate policies that impact their day-to-day life is difficult.

Strong social cohesion – the degree of trust in decision-makers, shared values, and sense of belonging within a community – can underpin the successful delivery of climate policies. This paper explores the potential for citizens' assemblies and juries to cultivate greater social cohesion and, therefore, more effective climate policy. It concludes that deliberative participatory processes can contribute positively to social cohesion when certain elements are in place.

1. What is social cohesion?

"Social cohesion is concerned with how we live well together in a diverse democracy and how we peacefully navigate disagreements for the common good, despite the differences among us"[1]

Social cohesion is important at community level, between social groups, and at institutional levels between citizen and state. It makes for societies that are healthier and more resilient to shocks and crises, while in its absence is a diminished sense of belonging and weakened social ties, increasing inequality of opportunity and declining trust in institutions.[2] Declining social cohesion has recently been highlighted in religious hate crime and racism in response to tensions in the Middle East, and the violent unrest witnessed in some parts of the UK over the summer of 2024.[3] The British Government has committed to working with communities across the UK "to build a culture of cohesion, trust and mutual respect.[4]

Social cohesion is underpinned by attitudes, norms and behaviours that include trust, a sense of belonging and a willingness to participate and help. In relations between citizens and the state (at the *macro* level), this refers to citizens' perceptions of trust in, and legitimacy of, the state and its institutions.[5] Between social groups (at the *meso* level) it means a sense of openness to people from other groups and willingness to engage in social action.[6]

"Macro" level: relations between citizens and the State
Institutional trust Perceived legitimacy of institutions

"Meso" level: relations with larger or secondary groups
Intergroup attitudes Openness to people from other groups
Participation or engagement in social actions

"Micro" level: interpersonal relations with close others
Institutional trust Density of social relationships Social Support

[diagram reproduced from Khan, 2024][1]

This report draws on recent research into the impacts of citizens' juries and assemblies that involved close observation of two deliberative processes and interviewing those involved (members, politicians, civil servants and commentators). It explores i) how the presence or absence of social cohesion can influence the effectiveness of climate policy, and ii) how juries and assemblies can help generate social cohesion.

2. How does social cohesion influence climate policy?

Some elements of the transition to a low-carbon future require citizens' *active consent and participation*, i.e. that we buy into, and collaborate with, changes to fundamental areas of our lives – to what we eat, how we travel, what we consume, and to where we live and work. These changes often bring co-benefits to health and well-being, but they may also feel challenging or burdensome, and the costs and benefits may be distributed unequally, potentially addressing or exacerbating existing inequalities.

Reducing greenhouse gas emissions from transport is a case in point. New infrastructure and systems should aim to enable the transition from travelling by private car to walking, cycling or using public transport. Still, it can require major re-organisations of behaviour, daily routines and what we spend, as well as consent to changes to how the physical environment is organised and restrictions to some modes of transport.

Policy implementation in this sphere depends on citizens' collaboration with change, but measures to bring about changes to how people travel can conflict with closely held identities, values, social norms, habits and structures. Changes may be unpopular for a range of reasons - including that they are not always perceived as fair - and resistance, backlash and division are common responses.

We argue that social cohesion - where there is widespread citizen trust and recognition of the legitimacy of government, and where citizens have an openness to other groups and to participating and engaging in social actions - can help to secure and sustain the implementation of climate policy where active consent and collaboration are required.

Relations between citizens and the state: Macro-level social cohesion

We suggest that people are more likely to consent to changes if they are proposed or introduced by authorities they trust and perceive to be legitimate. Such a context is also likely to contribute to politicians' sense of the "political space" available to them (the extent to which they perceive there is acceptance or support among their electorate)[7] to drive more ambitious climate action, and protect against what Khan terms "freedom-restricting harassment" whereby politicians and community leaders are threatened, silenced, self-censor or abandon the democratic process.[1]

As Simon Roberts, then Chief Executive of the Centre for Sustainable Energy, said

> *"The public will ultimately say "no" (i.e. refuse consent) to change they don't understand proposed by people they don't trust to meet needs they don't recognise for benefits they don't value at a cost they aren't willing to pay."*[7]

However, mistrust of the British political system is widespread, with 45% saying in 2023 that they would "almost never" trust British governments of any party to place the needs of the nation above the interests of their own political party.[8] In 2021, 84% of respondents to a survey believed that politicians don't care what people like them think, 76% believed that the UK Government looks down on them, and 62% thought that British democracy is rigged to serve the rich and influential.[9] Juan-Torres et al[10] identify low-trust groups in British society characterised by disengagement, distrust of institutions, feeling lonely and participating less. Distrust and disengagement leave low-trust groups more open to disinformation, more ambivalent about the importance of elections, and more open to non-democratic alternatives and disinformation.[9]

"No time disengagement," where people prioritise other things in their day-to-day lives ahead of democratic participation, can be distinguished from "no point disengagement," where disengagement stems from feeling frustrated or angry with what people perceive to be a broken political system and unaccountable politicians who don't care what ordinary people think. The latter group are more open to narratives that target other groups as enemies. Interactions between people who hold different views have potential to re-build trust and resilience against such narratives.[9]

Public participation in a policy process which gives citizens a genuine voice in shaping policy may increase their perception of legitimacy and trust in the state. Relatedly, high quality citizen input to policy can increase policy's responsiveness to the public's priorities and preferences. It can also help build politicians' and civil servants' trust in the public. There is, therefore, a potentially self-reinforcing cycle whereby the trustworthiness of the authority, the acceptability to the public of its policies, as well as officials' trust in citizens, are all enhanced by public involvement in policy development.

Relations between social groups: Meso-level social cohesion

Social cohesion at the *meso* level is characterised by a sense of belonging and willingness to help, participation and engagement in new behaviours and actions, and groups working towards solutions together with people with different perspectives, circumstances and values. These factors would appear to support successful policy implementation where active consent and collaboration are required to bring about changes in fundamental aspects of day-to-day life.

Where meso level social cohesion is low, progress with climate policies may be inhibited by between-group antagonism, which draws initiative, energy and momentum away from climate action. In extreme cases, this can manifest as culture wars and resistance or backlash to policies. Parker describes a state of affairs where "*value conflicts lead to entrenched divisions, mutual incomprehension and breakdown of social cooperation, undermining our ability to find common ground and take collective action on critical issues.*"[11]

Where there are deep divisions people often assume that those on "the other side" act in bad faith,[12] an unpromising point of departure for finding ways forward together. However, even between groups who disagree on ways forward and may not trust each other, deliberation may reveal a high degree of agreement on the legitimacy of basic values,[13] with differences lying mainly in how people prioritise values or how they apply them in particular cases, implying latent potential for establishing common ground.

Even where disagreement on values persist between people on different sides of an argument, deliberation can help them to recognise the other's positions as legitimate, a process described as establishing meta-consensus.[14]

3. What role can deliberative mini-publics play in contributing to social cohesion?

Deliberative mini-publics (DMPs) aim to respond to complex or contentious societal challenges like the climate crisis by creating more effective, trusted policy through public participation and deliberation. Citizens' juries and citizens' assemblies are examples of DMPs. They bring together a diverse group of citizens selected by sortition, or civic lottery, to reflect the make-up of the broader public. Over multiple days, they learn, deliberate and work together to develop policy recommendations.

Groups who are dissatisfied with politics, i.e. have an anti-elite sentiment and a low sense of political competence, tend to express highest levels of support for DMPs, albeit support that is contingent on the expectation of a favourable policy outcome.[15]

This paper explores the potential for DMPs to support or generate social cohesion at the macro and meso levels through three characteristics:

1. selection by sortition
2. learning and deliberation
3. link to policy.

It draws on interviews with people who participated in one of two case study DMPs as members, commissioners or commentators.

1. Selection by sortition

Sortition, or civic lottery, randomly selects a group of citizens to reflect the make-up of the broader community. Some argue that selecting DMP members by sortition brings a legitimacy to the policy process that can complement standard systems of representative politics or statutory consultations. It allows everyone an equal chance of being selected to take part, members reflect their communities more closely in terms of demographics, as well as sometimes attitudes or behaviours, and they are not constrained by the vested interests and political cycles that act on elected politicians.

If they are to tackle division and support social cohesion, DMPs need to reach and include low-trust, disaffected and disengaged citizens, particularly the "no point disengaged" (see p.5, above), both within the mini-public and as it interfaces with the maxi-public outside.

Techniques to involve low-trust groups before, during and after a DMP could include:

- following up the invitation to take part with door-knocking in areas where levels of disengagement are known to be higher[16] or reaching out through groups working with people from disengaged groups;
- using selection criteria that include a measure of distrust in "the system" or in Government to counteract the risk of a skew in recruitment towards more engaged groups;
- lowering practical, financial and cultural barriers to participation for DMP members and for those who bring evidence (for example payment for time, reimbursing caring and other costs, providing translation services, being sensitive to and welcoming cultural and religious differences);
- awareness-raising of the process and its outcomes among potential participants and the wider public through active outreach and accessible communications.

Reaching beyond the mini-public to the maxi-public through traditional and social media channels is challenging. However, experimental research suggests that mini-public endorsement of expert evidence renders it more persuasive to those outside the process than the evidence presented by the expert themselves,[17] suggesting that, insofar as the broader public can be reached, members of the maxi-public are more likely to trust the conclusions of a DMP.

2. Learning and deliberation

Low carbon transport policies often trigger strong positive or negative responses, depending on how they interact with individuals' geography and other circumstances, values, identities, habits and practices. Policy initiatives can therefore be polarising, and social cohesion may be fractured when divided communities support or oppose them. Divided social groups may attribute malign motives to decision-makers and to each other, believing the "others" to be acting in bad faith. This can influence how people engage in formal and informal discussions including statutory consultations, town hall meetings, lobbying or online debates.

DMPs can pre-empt or respond to division by fostering a more collaborative and constructive discourse. During the learning and deliberation phase of a DMP, members hear and discuss evidence from, and lived experiences of, invited speakers and fellow DMP members who bring a wide range of perspectives from diverse backgrounds. Then, supported by a facilitator, they aim to develop policy recommendations that are acceptable to all. Deliberation is a careful, informed and open discussion to weigh evidence about an issue which "*aims to determine what a group of people can agree to, rather than what as individuals they might like or want.*"[18] Members critically reflect over a significant period of time and with a diverse group on evidence and arguments about an issue,[19] which provides an opportunity for their own positions to be scrutinised and their biases challenged and potentially corrected.[20]

Engaging low-trust groups

If they are to engender trust across social groups, DMPs must be designed and run in ways that allow all members, including those from low-trust groups, to engage in and trust the process, taking into account learning styles and preferences. A member of one transport-related DMP, for example, described having limited trust in institutions and authorities. They valued hearing lay perspectives and described how the information brought by lay people landed differently with them compared to information brought by professional experts:

> *"... It may be like a bias of mine, or just something I've grown up with... But I think it also come from like a cultural background of growing up in rural [country name]. There's a lot of what's the word...? I guess like, abandonment, maybe from like, government bodies or research bodies, and there's a lot of condescending sort of relationship that happens... So I think growing up in an environment like that, you learn naturally a sort of distrust. People telling from not your experience, whether to believe it or not.. So I have that push to prefer peoples with lived experience.*
>
> *... When experts spoke, I felt like I had to sort of like grasp some of the information. I learned some of like, the pictures and the data and stuff... but with like lived experiences.... it was like a different process of digesting that information. It was more like... I guess also based on like, feelings alone."* (DMP1 member 7)

This is one example of how DMPs can be designed to include low-trust groups, and further work to explore additional ways would be useful.

Seeking common ground

In addressing the issues that tend to divide communities and decision-makers, learning and deliberation in DMPs should engage directly with the most challenging dilemmas and trade-offs from all perspectives. Skilled and sensitive facilitation is critical to establishing common ground, and certain approaches are particularly well suited to this. Convergent facilitation,[21] for example, aims to surface the needs underlying people's disparate preferences and their criteria for acceptable solutions. Adversarial co-operation[11] proposes comprehensive value mapping at an early stage to elucidate and clarify the moral values at play. Approaches such as these are oriented towards working across difference, including the most and the least powerful and those with minority views.

Facilitated deliberation may uncover the presence of unrecognised shared or complementary values. People who disagree on solutions may find they agree on values, and that their disagreement centres largely on how they prioritise those values. Even where value differences are unresolved following deliberation, surfacing and exploring them may leave parties more trusting of one another and establish potential for building meta-consensus (the recognition of the legitimacy of others' values, even when those values are not shared). This can lay the ground for a constructive search for agreement on solutions and more tractable collective decision-making, whether through voting, working agreements that all sides support for different reasons, or agreements that majorities support and minorities can live with, aiming to protect against the risk of marginalising dissenting voices and exacerbating distrust and division.[14]

> *"On the first day, as we were chatting, it became clear that there were very diverse opinions among the jury on things like car ownership, cars, and the degree of concern about climate. And so initially, I thought, 'Oh, God, we're going to have some really, really big arguments here.'"* (DMP2 member 1)

However, after four days of learning and deliberating together, a collective statement agreed by all jury members stated that

> *"We knew that reaching agreement on how to balance people's travel needs with environmental and health considerations would be challenging (…) However, our experience proved that, with expert facilitation, a group of people, diverse in life experience, knowledge and understanding, can meet such challenges; and that the negotiations along the way can be 'bonding' rather than 'polarising' (…) Our experience has been that individuals are far happier with change if they think they, or 'people like them', have been truly listened to."*

Low Traffic Neighbourhoods had strongly divided opinion among local communities where one case study DMP took place. Campaigners for and against them attended as commentators, one being described by a juror as "passionate" to the point of being "somewhat aggressive" when they addressed the jury. However, when they joined discussions at individual tables, commonalities between their concerns and those of their opponents were identified, and a sense that there was potential to seek mutually acceptable solutions was established.

> *"The group that I was in, we spoke to him and said, "Well, you know, sort of, what about this? And what about that, and how do you feel about this?" And he was quite open, I think more so because I think it came down to that sort of, "we've got more in common than divides us" principle because his reasons for his concerns were the same as the people who were pro-LTNs. And actually, if you can agree on the founding principles, then how you achieve it, you can you move a little bit closer together."* (DMP2 member 2)

Managing misinformation

Finding common ground is increasingly challenging in an era of widespread misinformation and misperceptions ("*beliefs about factual matters… that are not supported by clear evidence and expert opinion*"[22]) about climate change and the motives for, and effects of, transport policies. Climate and transport assemblies are often framed around an overarching question premised on the need to address climate change or reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This framing avoids spending time debating whether or not climate change is "real," allowing more time to focus instead on seeking ways to mitigate or adapt to it.

Of course, climate science is not universally accepted and some DMP members may not agree with the premise of the assembly's question. This might be the case more often for individuals who distrust scientific or political "elites". This DMP member, for example, was frustrated by the assumptions underpinning the process and felt manipulated:

> *"In fact, I do a lot of research about things… and there are numerous scientists around the world and other people who are much more clever than I, who are giving a slightly different slant to climate change and all this type of thing. And we had experts who came to talk to us about things and they obviously have their pitch… I think the whole idea of a citizen's assembly is great, right. But on this occasion, I feel they wanted a particular outcome… So there was a narrative, and we were on that and it didn't matter if somebody tried to move outwards, slightly. "No, shut up, we're going this way." … Before the assembly, I thought 'I must be reasonable. I won't do short journeys…' But at the end of it, I was so incensed, I thought 'I don't want to be reasonable at all'… I felt sort of manipulated."* (DMP1, member 1)

Deliberation within DMPs allows lay citizens to scrutinise experts, bringing the potential to gain knowledge, transform attitudes and reduce misperceptions about contentious issues.[23-25] However, the learning and deliberation phase of the assembly is not guaranteed to alter DMP members' support of conspiracy theories or misinformation about climate science, and in some cases appears even to entrench them and their determination to act on them.

Finding ways to incorporate minority perspectives in DMPs' policy recommendations in ways that retain the trust of members – and indeed that of observers or followers in the maxi-public – in the process and in decision-makers who respond to them is an important challenge for the use of DMPs to support social cohesion.

A significant challenge to DMPs is to find ways to manage misinformation by including people with non-mainstream views without undermining the learning element of a deliberative processes. An approach proposed by Parker [11] involves introducing explicit conversations about criteria for legitimate expertise and reliable information, then focuses on identifying shared underlying values and concerns, decoupled from false beliefs. Building on this, more research is needed to establish effective ways to include people with climate sceptical views, or who adhere to misinformation or conspiracy theories, in DMPs premised on climate change mitigation or adaptation.

Link to policy

DMPs have potential to enhance trust in, and the perceived legitimacy of, government and institutions for those directly involved in them. If effective links from the mini- to the maxi-public are achieved, this effect could be extended to the wider population. By incorporating input from diverse citizens, policy itself could become more responsive to citizens' priorities and therefore more legitimate, and recognised by members of the public as in the public interest. As members gain insights into the policy process, they can develop an understanding of the constraints on those acting within it and take a more sympathetic view of their situations as the quotes from these two DMP members illustrate:

> *"I was surprised with... how involved the Council were, with trying to do the right thing or get the right concepts. And I think that surprised me because sometimes you think that the council, they just plod along and do it. But, you know, I was quite pleased that how involved they got and how they wanted to do it."*
> (DMP1, member 4)

> *"I think I definitely understand it [the council] better... There was an empathy there of, like, understanding they also have sort of tied hands. And it's sort of like a larger thing to sort of try to untangle and work together.*
> (DMP1, member 7)"

Collaboration between DMP members to develop policy can support trust between social groups, as members work together to find common ground and solutions that work for everyone.

The link to policy is critical for groups who hold an anti-elite sentiment and have a low sense of political competence to support DMPs. DMPs will, therefore, support social cohesion to the extent that policy recommendations faithfully represent the priorities and preferences of members and are followed through with action.

Conclusion

Further work is needed in a number of areas: to understand best how to manage misinformation in a way that maintains the engagement of low-trust groups in the process; to understand best how those contracted to run DMPs can work with commissioners, and what the commissioners can do themselves to collaborate with stakeholders and civil society, to ensure the recommendations influence policy; and to bridge the gap between mini- and maxi-publics so the cohesion built within DMPs can be extended more widely.

To the extent that these can be achieved, processes like citizens' juries, assemblies and other forms of deliberative public engagement, can be planned with an eye to their potential to enhance social cohesion. Through developing the wider public's openness to other groups and trust in the legitimacy of institutions, critical engagement in climate policy becomes more possible.

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