

People's Assemblies

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What are People's Assemblies?

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY	PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY	COMMUNITY ASSEMBLY
Deliberative democracy	Deliberative democracy	Deliberative democracy
Group deliberation	Group deliberation	Group deliberation
Informed by experts, stakeholders and people with lived experiences	No external speakers necessary	Informed by experts, stakeholders and people with lived experiences
Random selection ('sortition')	Self-selected	Self-selected
10 – 30 days	Can be as little as 45 minutes	If possible several hours, but not necessary. 90 minutes to a day
Inform policy	Inform activists <u>decisions</u>	Inform policy

Why do we use People's Assemblies?

People's assemblies are a structured way for a group of people to discuss issues or make decisions collectively, so that all voices are heard and valued equally, and no one person or group dominates the discussion.

Extinction Rebellion uses participatory democracy processes, such as people's assemblies, in order to model participatory democracy within the movement, generate ideas, gather feedback and make decisions.

People's assemblies have a very different purpose, structure and process to **citizens' assemblies** which is the central idea in our third demand in the UK.

This grass roots method of self-organising and direct action is genuinely democratic has been used throughout history to instigate people-powered change. People's Assemblies were at the centre of

the Arab Revolt that spread from Tunisia to Egypt in 2011, as well as the Spanish 15M movement, the Occupy movement, and the Y En A Marre movement in Senegal, and they are central to the organisation of the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria.

The third XR demand - the use of citizens' assemblies chosen by sortition - shows one way that our broken, political system can be made obsolete. Using citizens' assemblies, we trust ordinary people, who are chosen at random and take part in a deliberative democratic process, to address the realities of the climate emergency in a way that those in power have failed to do and can never do. People's assemblies and **community assemblies** offer other ways for us to transform our democracy, as they offer a way of seeing democracy in action out on the streets or in a community and help people to reclaim power.

Both **citizens'**, **community** and people's assemblies are based on the 'assembly' process which enables people to share equally and openly within an environment that is non-judgemental and respectful - and facilitated to that effect.

As the world becomes more and more atomized, meeting with strangers and sharing your feelings is itself transformative. In the context of Extinction Rebellion, assemblies are constructed in a way where people are safe to share their experience, make decisions collectively and work together to problem solve, as well as share the grief and loss they feel for a world that is rapidly collapsing.

The assemblies hold that grief with respect, and allow people to work together to organise towards rebellion and a shift away from the system that has brought us to this crisis of all crises. Assemblies are not an alternative to non-violent direct action, they complement such action and can themselves be a form of direct action if they are being held in a space designed to be disruptive or during occupations.

Within Extinction Rebellion assemblies have specific uses which these pages will explain. Assemblies are not an alternative to non violent direct action but they will complement that process. We continue with peaceful civil disobedience at the centre of all we do. People's Assemblies can be part of the deep adaptation that communities have to go through in order to face the growing impact of climate and biodiversity breakdown. As societal structures collapse, we are going to have to reclaim power for our communities and these forms of participatory democracy will become essential to the way we organise.

How can People's Assemblies be used?

- **Direct Action**

Assemblies can form part of a direct action when they are held during occupations, roadblocks or other forms of peaceful civil disobedience involving groups of people holding spaces any length of time.

- **Organising and Decision Making**

Groups of any size can meet and discuss issues or make decisions collectively in regards to moving the aims and actions of an XR group forward. The basic participatory

democracy method can be used by direct action groups, regional groups, affinity and working groups or community groups to make emergency decisions or for decisions on how to organise themselves.

The Three Pillars of People's Assemblies

1. **Radical Inclusivity**

Effective assemblies achieve radical inclusivity, where the emphasis on all being heard and valued equally means no voices are dominating and the collective wisdom of the assembly can be reached. People can participate safely and openly, without fear of judgement or ridicule. Radical inclusivity is a practical step to widening a movement through providing agency to all who participate. Radical Inclusivity also means being aware of potential barriers to engagement and working with those affected to enable participation. Think about disabled access, sign language, whisper interpretation for those for whom English isn't their first language and other possible means by which those barriers can be removed. Ask if there are any barriers to engagement that people need to identify and then request that the group works together to find ways to remove them.

2. **Active Listening**

Active listening is focusing on hearing people before developing a response in your mind whilst someone is still talking. Active listening is vital as it enhances our capacity to empathise; when we fully listen to others, we gain more of an understanding of people, their views and their concerns.

3. **Trust**

Once the process for a people's assembly has been agreed, it is essential that participants trust the process and trust the facilitators. The facilitators enable this trust by sticking to the agreed process and ensuring that everyone follows too. It is not meant to be a perfect system and can only be effective if people trust that those involved have come together in humility, to work towards decisions and actions that are best for all.

Diversity in opinion will pay you back in the long run socially... if we don't fix this problem to start with we are simply going to replicate existing power structures.

Eleanor Saitta, hacker and designer

Designing Questions for People's Assemblies

What to discuss ?

This will depend entirely on the setting and framing of the Assembly. Assembly organisers will often choose the subjects for assemblies which are most relevant to furthering the aims of the group.

An assembly agenda could be:

- **a proposal**
 - e.g. we should support the local anti-fracking camp with a day of non-violent civil disobedience at the drilling site next Saturday
- **organising**
 - e.g. feedback and updates from the working groups
- **decision making**
 - e.g. shall we join with a larger group or create our own actions here in our town or do both?
- **or include a discussion point**
 - e.g. what will the effects of climate breakdown be on our community over the next three years?
 - Get more guidance on this type of question on the [Community Assembly pages](#)

Proposals

If the assembly is focusing on a proposal, the facilitators go for a 'temperature check' where the proposal is read out again (after being discussed in the breakout groups) and the assembly use their hands to show agreement or not.

If only a few people are showing agreement then the proposal is taken back and can either be adjusted to fit the ideas that have emerged from the points made in the assembly or is dropped altogether if it has no support or no way of being adjusted to meet the collective vision of the assembly. For instance, a proposal for putting all the group's time and resources into a local anti-fracking campaign may not be approved, but a popular point made from a breakout group that some of the time and resources be put into the local campaign could see the proposal returning with that adjustment.

Facilitators check with the assembly note taker that the exact wording of the proposal is noted.

Decision Making

When a temperature check is used to decide between two or more options and there is no clear decision, then the Assembly will need to decide how to proceed. It may be a case of taking an actual counted vote, or returning the options to the breakout groups to find a solution that can accommodate the points raised or the differing wishes.

Assemblies during direct action or occupations

Depending on the size, duration and police presence, these assemblies could potentially be:

- A quick decision making People's Assembly ('the police have given us these options, what should we do?').

In a situation where an extremely rapid decision was required, such assemblies could even dispense with breakout groups, relying instead on facilitation towards the whole assembly, taking in immediate hand signal based reactions.

Alternatively, if the action or occupation were going on for a long period of time, they could be longer assemblies where people were able to discuss the key issues related to the action ('we are occupying the offices of a major extraction corporation, in what other ways can we disrupt the fossil fuel industry?').

- A **Community Assembly** as part of the outreach during an action or occupation, and can be designed to include members of the public, or include invitations to people from organisations or institutions that are being targeted or affected to come and participate. The subjects for discussion can relate directly to the target of the action, or can be more broad and inclusive such as 'how can we support each other in our communities in the face of climate breakdown?' or 'how can we help each other to face the grief that awareness brings?'

Assemblies provide us with a process by which to move and act with immense flexibility as a large group during times of action or occupation. They allow for immediate changes and decisions to be made on the spot that enable us to act and react with speed and flexibility, whilst still being able to make those decisions collectively, and in large numbers.



Photo by Ruth Davey

How to Run a PA- Step by Step

This is the basic framework for creating and running a People's Assembly. This 'Quick Start Guide' is essentially all you need to run an assembly.

If you would prefer to work from a more rigid script than the description below, you can use the following:

- [Script for an in-person people's assembly \(Google doc\)](#)
- [Script for an online people's assembly \(Google doc\)](#)

Roles

Each assembly needs:

- Lead Facilitator(s). Ideally two with a gender balance. Responsible for the overall running of the assembly, time keeping, and the delivery of all relevant information. Lead Facilitators should have completed People's Assembly or Community Assembly facilitation training (training for both is similar). If you can't attend a live training session, you can watch a recording of [Community Assembly Facilitation training](#), [People's Assembly facilitation training one](#), or [People's Assembly facilitation training two](#). Lead Facilitators would also benefit from having completed [general XR Facilitation training](#).
- Assembly Note Taker. Responsible for recording the results of the Feedback phase of the assembly and responsible for feeding the assembly results into wherever they are destined to go.

Each breakout group needs:

- A Facilitator. Facilitates discussion using [hand signals](#), ensures no one dominates, keeps an eye on the time, maintains radical inclusivity and active listening.
- A Note Taker. Summarises the most popular points, ideally as bullet points. Aims to boil them down to a few key points or ideas from the discussion. Looks for wavy hands to signify agreement.

Phases of a People's Assembly

There are three main phases of an Assembly: Setup, Deliberation and Integration (feeding back). Setup can be broken down further into Introduction and Input which can be of varying lengths depending on the purpose of the assembly.

Ideally the Setup phase should be no more than 30 mins in total. Unless it is an emergency assembly to make a rapid decision all assemblies should begin with something to unite all of those present.

Phase 1: Introduction & Setup (approx 30 mins)

Introduction

- Introduce and explain the **hand signals** so that they can be used throughout all parts of the assembly. - Lead Facilitators introduce the Assembly agenda, including where the results of this assembly will go.
- Talk through **the three pillars** and ask for help from the crowd to remove any barriers to engagement that may be identified.
- Read out the Inclusivity Statement:

We value all voices equally in the assembly, as the aim is to hear the wisdom of the crowd gathered here and not to have the assembly dominated by individual voices or groups. We recognise that confident speakers are not always right and that those who are not confident speakers will often have the most useful ideas or opinions to put into the discussion. This is why we value all voices equally and we ask you to do the same. We do not tolerate any calling out, abuse or shaming. We welcome all people but not all behaviours.

Setup

This can be as simple as the Lead Facilitators framing the question for discussion and why the assembly has been convened, or asking the gathered crowd for suggestions as to what they would like to deliberate on (known as People's Choice). Or it can involve a longer and more in depth Input section such as a live panel of experts, or video input.

Using People's Choice to Decide the Assembly Question(s)

Lead Facilitator asks for suggestions from the crowd on what they would like to discuss, and the Assembly Note taker records them. Ideally looking for three or four suggestions maximum or the process can be very long and drawn out! The crowd are then asked to vote using the 'Temperature Check' method. The Lead Facilitator reads them out one at a time and looks for the most 'Wavy Hand' signals to show the overall preference.

Inviting participants to share why they are there

Invite people to take the microphone for two minutes maximum and share their feelings about what has brought them to join the assembly or action that day, to share what is in their heart. In an open public assembly, this section can be drawn out as long as people volunteer to speak. It opens the space for people to connect emotionally, but shouldn't be used as a 'soap box' on the issues about to be discussed. Ideally ask for a woman to speak first (it has been shown that this will greatly increase the level of engagement of female participants. The rate of engagement and uptake for males isn't affected in the same way), and allow as much dead air as is necessary for people to build up the courage to come and talk. Be strict with timing but ensure that people speaking are supported and made completely safe in their sharing. Ideally work with two facilitators so that one facilitator 'guards' mic, whilst one sits in front of speaker with timer and gives 'round up' hand signal as they approach 2 mins.

Phase 2 : Deliberation (approx 40 mins)

5 mins intro, 25 mins deliberation, 10 mins note feedback

Introducing the topic

- Lead Facilitator clarifies discussion topic or question, including making clear how many points are to be fed back from each 'breakout group' (usually between 3 and 5 depending on the size of the assembly).
- Lead Facilitators divide the assembly into 'breakout groups' ideally of between six to eight. Facilitators need to try and ensure this is roughly the size of each group and encourage people to sit in groups with people they don't already know.
- Each Breakout Group has one Facilitator and one Note Taker as explained above.
- Clarify duration of deliberation (discussion in breakout groups) phase and stick to timings throughout an assembly, as many people who are attending have work or family responsibilities that have to be respected.
- Recap hand signals here.

Breakout Groups

- It is good practice for the Facilitator to restate the discussion topic or question and for the Note Taker to write it down. This enables people in the group to refer back to the original point for discussion to make sure the group stays focused and on subject.

- It is also good to start by going around the group and stating names, and making space for anyone to highlight any barriers to engagement that they may have that the small group can work together to try to work around.
- **Breakout Groups discuss topic for 25 mins.**
- 10 mins before end of Deliberation Phase
 - Lead Facilitator calls time for the end of the discussion time.
 - Note taker feeds back their summary of the discussion to identify the key points and agree with the group that the points they have recorded as most popular are an accurate representation.

Phase 3: Intregation (approx 20 mins)

- Lead Facilitator calls assembly note takers to the front of the Assembly.
- Each Note Taker feeds back key points
- Crowd uses wavy hands to indicate support
- Assembly Note Taker records the points that get the most overall approval from the entire assembly, or just records the points as they are fed back. It's nice to do this on a white board or a large piece of paper so that the assembly participants can see it.
- If there is a need to vote on something as the results of the Assembly you can do a 'Temperature Check'. The Lead Facilitators reads out the different options to be voted on and the members of the assembly cast their 'vote' using 'wavey hands' for the option they like the best. The Assembly Note Taker and Lead Facilitators watch for the most wavy hands and that gets taken forward. [Read more about using an assembly to make a decision on a specific proposal here.](#)
- Assembly Note taker feeds results of the Assembly to wherever they are destined to go, such as central online results, or sent to Coordinators etc. This is determined prior to the assembly and will have formed part of the framing of the process in the Setup phase.

Finishing up (approx 10 mins)

- Appreciation for Facilitators and Note Takers
- 'Shout Outs' are an invitation for those gathered to call out brief notifications such as upcoming actions or events. These should be short and arranged with the facilitators beforehand if possible.
- Lead Facilitator to summarise the results of the Assembly if necessary, and thank everyone for participating.

FAQs about People's Assemblies

How many people do I need to hold a PA?

Ideally deliberation groups of 6 to 12 people and a minimum of 3 groups. However, they sometimes run with fewer people and the PA process can be used with several hundred and possibly over a thousand people.

Can I hold a PA without attending People's Assembly/Community Assembly Facilitation training?

Yes but read the manual and the script and if you are finding it difficult be honest with people present. People appreciate openness and will support you. You will usually find that there are people there with some experience and they are delighted to help.

What is the structure of the Assembly Facilitation Training?

The session aims to help you feel more confident about facilitating subgroups or organising and facilitating assemblies and we give you the opportunity to connect with other facilitators to help organise and facilitate assemblies in pairs or teams. We also talk about active listening, inclusion and allowing all voices to be heard and how to deal with difficult situations.

How do People's Assemblies differ from Citizens' Assemblies and Community Assemblies?

All three are based on the 'assembly' process which enables people to share equally and openly within an environment that is non-judgemental and respectful - and facilitated to that effect. See the graphic below for an explanation of the differences:

CITIZENS' ASSEMBLY

PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY

COMMUNITY ASSEMBLY

Deliberative democracy	Deliberative democracy	Deliberative democracy
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