

CLIMATE ASSEMBLIES AS A TOOL FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ASSOCIATIONS IN MOVING TOWARDS CLIMATE GOALS

Based on the example of the Youth Climate Assembly of Ida-Viru county in Estonia

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Estonian Fund for Nature (ELF) is an independent non-governmental association that protects nature by using the best expertise, innovative solutions, and the assistance of a wide range of stakeholders.

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A climate assembly is a citizen assembly set up to tackle climate issues. Citizen assemblies differ from other forms of involvement and participation in that the participants in the discussion and decision-making are selected by means of representative random sampling and the decision-making is preceded by a thorough knowledge-acquisition phase. Also, assemblies are structured in such a way that their decisions are binding and influence the political decisions and strategies of the country or region.



The Ida-Viru Youth Climate Assembly, held in the autumn of 2021, was Estonia's first climate assembly. It was led by the Estonian Fund for Nature and *Rohetiiger*. The Estonian Fund for Nature (ELF) is an independent non-governmental association that protects nature by using the best expertise, innovative solutions, and the assistance of a wide range of stakeholders. *Rohetiiger* (The Green Tiger) is a cross-sectoral cooperation platform aimed at creating a sustainable economic model. The Green Tiger brings together entrepreneurs, individuals, the public sector and the voluntary sector and, among its other strategic directions, offers an enrichment of democracy in the form of conducting and implementing climate assemblies. A number of other organisations also contributed to the organising of the event.

As the organiser of a climate assembly, an environmental organisation faces several challenges:

- As organisers, environmental associations play several roles at the same time. As the creators of the participatory environment, they must ensure the balance of information, the opportunity for different stakeholders to present their views, and the freedom for the participants to form an opinion based on previous and additional knowledge. At the same time, environmental associations are stakeholders in the process with their own vision and probably also solutions that they can present to participants on an equal footing with other stakeholders. One of the key issues in organising a climate assembly is keeping separate the roles of an independent moderator and a stakeholder. In the case of the Ida-Viru Climate Assembly, this was facilitated by the cooperation of two organisations with slightly different focuses, where *Rohetiiger* ensured that the process followed the international standards of a citizen assembly and was structured in a balanced way. As an active participant in the drawing up of the just transition plans, the Estonian Fund for Nature ensured the maintenance of focus and partnerships. Secondly, it was important to keep the various tasks separate also within the team of the Estonian Fund for Nature – messages of the organisers of the climate assembly and voicing out main views as stakeholders were conveyed by different people.
- Organising a climate assembly requires knowledge and skills – such as the nuances of inclusion, design of discussions, techniques for reaching a decision – which may be absent in an environmental organisation. On the other hand, at least on climate issues, the ability to bring different stakeholders together and use co-creation to find fair solutions to complex problems is becoming increasingly important. Environmental organisations are therefore also gradually acquiring those skills. The organising of the Ida-Viru Climate Assembly was assisted by the previous work by the Estonian Fund for Nature on the just transition of the Ida-Viru region, where various co-creative methods have been tested and which has proven that involvement and cooperation are effective. Organising the climate assembly provided additional experience in maintaining a dialogue with stakeholders and working with a variety of multipliers.
- Thirdly, the question remains whether and to what extent the environmental organisation in charge of organising the climate assembly will be responsible for the proposals formulated by the assembly and the monitoring of their implementation. This is particularly difficult when the proposals are of a wider scope than the environmental organisation's own strategic direction, or when they directly contradict

with the environmental organisation's positions. The organising of the Ida-Viru climate assembly was once again aided by the fact that cooperation with various organisations was designed into the process, which resulted in a number of ideas put forth on how to monitor the implementation of the proposals in the future. For example, the local college offered to cooperate.

For environmental associations, the value of the climate assembly lies primarily in the effectiveness of this method in working towards the following objectives:

- overall community/societal awareness and interest in climate change related topics;
- supporting the participation of communities in order to increase social demand, citizens' initiatives, and action for change;
- incorporating different perspectives into decisions so that they better take into account the different needs of the community;
- improving cooperation between organisations.

The experience of the Youth Climate Assembly of Ida-Viru county

Estonia's first climate-themed citizen assembly or climate assembly was held in November and December 2021. The engagement format for young people aged 16–29 in Ida-Viru County was entitled "How to ensure that the transition to a climate-friendly future is fair for young people". Ida-Virumaa is a county in North-Eastern Estonia, the well-being of which has depended on the oil shale industry for decades. In order to move towards climate goals, the county's economy must be restructured, as a result of which many jobs specific to the region will be lost. The region is already characterised by the exodus of people, especially young people, low wages, and a lack of entrepreneurship. The task of the young people who participated in the climate assembly was to evaluate the plan for a just transition in the region and to supplement it with activities and interventions that are important from young people's point of view.

At the end of October, approximately 3,500 young people from Ida-Virumaa received an invitation to participate in the climate assembly, and those wishing to participate had to register via an online form. From the registrants, 40 young people were selected who most accurately represented the profile of the county's youth, taking into account the proportion of men and women, their place of residence, employment status, and mother tongue. Due to COVID-19, the climate assembly took place virtually. The participants gathered on three days

– on one weekend to gather knowledge and hear out the stakeholders, and two weeks later to formulate the proposals. On the final day of the debate, 25 young people took part and 21 of them voted on the proposals.

The young people discussed and formulated criteria for assessing the climate-friendliness and fairness of various ideas and interventions, assessed the Territorial Just Transition Plan of the region, and made suggestions for its improvement. The 26 proposals formulated as a result of the discussions were submitted to the ministries and the regional government association in order to take them into account in the national plans and regional strategy in the best possible way. The following results are particularly important for the Estonian Fund for Nature:

1. Overall awareness of climate issues

An anthropological study carried out in preparation for the climate collection revealed that local young people do not link environmental protection with climate objectives. The links between climate change and the county's just transition plans are also weak for them. We built the climate assembly on three pillars: climate change, transition processes (transition to a more climate-friendly future), and the development prospects of the region. This helped the participants to better understand these connections, and also to formulate proposals based on these connections. One of the advantages of the citizen assembly method is the media work that accompanies the discussions. While initially there was little local interest in the climate assembly, both local and national media gradually began reporting it, also covering the young participants and their ideas. As a result of the process, local spokespersons emerged who, while sharing their climate assembly experiences, also addressed issues related to the transition to a carbon-neutral economic model from their own point of view, thus encouraging discussion on climate issues.

2. Empowerment of community participation

In terms of target area and group, the Ida-Viru youth climate assembly was special. Many participants had not previously received information about the plans of the state and local authorities to organise a just transition in the region, let alone participated in related discussion. The climate assembly had to be conducted in Estonian and Russian, since as much as 80 per cent of the target group are Russian-speaking young people. The participants' limited experience in participation and democracy also had to be taken into account. As a result of the process, some young people want to continue cooperating with each other, including developing further the proposals that arose from the climate assembly.

3. Incorporating different views into decisions

We organised Estonia's first climate assembly for young people in a particular region to help incorporate the opinions of young people into just transition plans. For example, a significant proportion of the climate assembly's proposals related to education and training opportunities. Even though education and training have played an important role in the fair transition plan in the past, young people emphasised the importance of the subject fields necessary for the green transition, the quality of education at the local level, and the importance of continuing to seek local young people's opinions on educational choices.

4. Cooperation between organisations

The climate assembly is a demanding method and requires cooperation in pooling knowledge, transferring it, and supporting the implementation of proposals. Researchers, entrepreneurs and development organisations in the region were involved in the knowledge and stakeholder consultation phase. The possibilities for taking the proposals of the climate assembly into account in the national and local strategies and development plans were discussed with the ministries and the regional decision-making body. The established contacts and strengthened cooperation relations will be useful in the further work of the Estonian Fund for Nature.

Recommendations for organisers of climate assemblies

1. The climate assembly is well-suited for discussing multi-faceted topics and finding solutions to complex problems with community members. The citizen assembly can thus be recommended as a working method for environmental associations dealing with climate issues, as it contributes to public awareness, brings more people to the debate, and makes it possible to find the solutions for the changes necessary for the transition best suited to local conditions.
2. Skilful framing of the issue being addressed at the climate assembly helps understand the links between climate change and the steps needed to tackle it. The choice of topics should be sufficiently narrow to keep the discussions focused and to enable the participants to explore the different facets of the problem before making a decision. On the other hand, the range of topics should be sufficiently wide to accommodate participants with different backgrounds and experiences. When framing a topic, it is useful to take into account the knowledge and the experiences of the participants, as well as other conditions arising from the particularities of the region. For this end, it is useful to do preliminary research and other background work.

3. The decisions made as a result of the discussions of the participants in the climate assembly may not and need not coincide with the views and positions of the environmental associations. It is therefore important for the environmental associations to consider how to combine the roles of an independent organiser and a stakeholder representative.