

Can Citizens' Climate Assemblies Help Society to Change?

The issue of climate change must be tackled cooperatively on a global scale. In this issue of *My Vision*, we explore the possibilities offered by citizens' climate assemblies, a new initiative that involves citizen participation.

About This Issue

The Trend Towards Citizens' Climate Assemblies Is Growing in Japan - We Are Seeing the Possibility of Spurring an Evolution of Representative Democracy

Shigeki Uno

Executive Vice President, NIRA / Professor, Institute of Social Science, The University of Tokyo

In 2023, extreme high temperatures were recorded in many parts of the world. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has once again communicated his sense that we face a crisis, and has criticized countries for their delays in taking measures in response to global warming.

While the existing political system has failed to take effective measures, citizens' climate assemblies, a new initiative based on citizen participation, are expected to become more widespread in Japan and act as a spur for change.

How important are citizens' climate assemblies?

What will it take to make this an effective initiative in Japan?

In this issue of *My Vision*, we sought the opinions of a number of interviewees with considerable experience in this area: researchers, the Director of an environmental organization, and the head of a local government.

Keywords... Citizens' climate assemblies, democracy, issue of climate change

Expert Opinions

Can Citizens' Climate Assemblies Help Society to Change?

What is the significance of citizens' climate assemblies?

What will it take to make this an effective initiative in Japan?

Discussion Involving Citizens Can Lead to Significant Changes in Society as a Whole

Naoyuki Mikami

Professor, Graduate School of Environmental Studies, Nagoya University

Keywords... Mini-publics, the state of democracy, decision-making mechanisms

Citizen Participation in National Policy Through Deliberative Discussion Among Citizens

Seita Emori

Professor, Institute for Future Initiatives, The University of Tokyo

Keywords... Procedural legitimacy, consensus-building with public acceptance, structure of injustice

Deliberative Discussion Results in Climate Change Being Viewed as a "Personal Matter"

Akane Iwasaki

Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences, The University of Tokyo

Keywords... Action to change society, deliberative process, forward-looking perspective

Citizens' Climate Assemblies May Achieve a Breakthrough Towards Questioning the Roots of the Social System

Kimiko Hirata

Executive Director, Climate Integrate

Keywords... Sense of personal involvement, collaboration involving citizen participation, gulf between the present and the future we want to realize

Realizing a "Fully-inclusive" Civil Society Through Deliberative Discussion, with Local Governments Taking the Lead

Tatsuo Igarashi

Mayor of Tsukuba City

Keywords... Basis for change in behavior, voice of the silent majority, cost of democracy

Interview period : December, 2023

Interviewer: Haruka Watanabe (Research Coordinator & Research Fellow, NIRA)

About This Issue

The Trend Towards Citizens' Climate Assemblies Is Growing in Japan

- We Are Seeing the Possibility of Spurring an Evolution of Representative Democracy



Shigeki Uno

Executive Vice President, NIRA /
Professor, Institute of Social
Science, The University of Tokyo

Citizens' climate assemblies are finally taking root in Japan.

With the signing of the Paris Agreement in 2015, global efforts towards the realization of decarbonized societies have progressed, in particular in Europe, where citizens' climate assemblies were held in France and the United Kingdom from 2019 to 2020. In addition to politicians, experts, private-sector non-profit organizations, and other actors who have played a central role in combating climate change up to the present, ordinary citizens also participated in the discussions at these assemblies.

As in France, where the Citizens' Convention for Climate was held under the leadership of President Macron in response to protests against a proposed increase in fuel tax and the rise of the "gilets jaunes" movement in fall 2018, these assemblies in part represent an objection to the current status of democracy, and have the potential to make positive change in traditional election-centered representative democracy. In Japan, with Climate Assembly Sapporo 2020 (Note 1) as the spur, the number of such assemblies is increasing every year. In this issue of *My Vision*, we consider the current status of, and the challenges faced by, citizens' climate assemblies in Japan.

A Possibility of Changing the Status Quo of Democracy

Why do citizens' climate assemblies have the potential to change the current state of democracy? Elected officials tend to focus their attention on local issues in specific areas (their constituencies, etc.) in order to cater to the wishes of their electorate. In addition, because they are seeking reelection, they tend to prioritize issues that can feasibly be dealt with during their term of office over those that require long-term efforts. As an organizer of the Climate Assembly Sapporo 2020, Professor Naoyuki Mikami of Nagoya University's Graduate School of Environmental Studies, points out, "the traditional system of social decision-making has tended to put long-term issues such as climate change on the back-burner."

By contrast, ordinary citizens, who do not have to be concerned about elections, have the advantage of being able to address climate change more freely and from a long-term perspective. In particular, the use of a random drawing of lots to select citizen participants makes it possible for even those citizens who are not selected to think that they could have been selected. This contributes to a feeling of acceptance of the outcomes of the discussion and to a sense of the legitimacy of the procedure, explains Professor Seita Emori of the University of Tokyo's Institute for Future Initiatives.

Above all, the virtue of citizens' climate assemblies is the sense of being an active participant that blossoms in the participating citizens. Although many citizens are interested in the issue of climate change, this does not immediately translate into concrete action. Assistant Professor Akane Iwasaki of The University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences has served as

a facilitator at numerous citizens' climate assemblies, and reports that participants often respond with surprise that they might play a role in taking action to change society. It is only through a carefully designed deliberative process, which naturally includes information provided by experts, that many participants are able to develop a sense that the issue is a personal matter.

What Are the Challenges Facing Citizens' Climate Assemblies in Japan?

Nevertheless, it is clear that there are many challenges for the citizens' climate assemblies in Japan. The first problem is the degree to which awareness of the issue of climate change has spread among the public, and the level of concern among the public in relation to the issue. According to a survey (Note 2) conducted by the PEW Research Center in the United States in 2021, between 2015 and 2021, the percentage of respondents who answered "Very concerned" increased in many countries when asked if they were concerned that global climate change would harm them at some point in their lifetimes. In Japan, on the other hand, the percentage of respondents who answered "Very concerned" decreased by 8%. According to the Cabinet Office's 2020 Kikou hendou ni kansuru yoron chousa ("Survey of Public Opinion on Climate Change") (published in 2021) (Note 3), the 18-29 age group represented the lowest percentage of respondents who answered that they were "Concerned" about global environmental issues.

Kimiko Hirata, Executive Director of the think tank Climate Integrate, who is a long-term veteran in addressing the issue of climate change, also feels hopeful about the movement towards citizens' climate assemblies among local governments, given that in the past in Japan, even when awareness of the issue has increased, "the pendulum swings back to the status quo." Nevertheless, Dr. Hirata tells us, a gulf remains between this major social issue and citizens' awareness, between policymakers and citizens, and between the current world and the future we want to achieve. We must foster a mindset that seeks to address the issues, and this also involves education.

While many emphasize the significance of citizens' climate assemblies as citizen-driven events, there are also those who see the importance of the roles of the national and local governments. Even if these assemblies make recommendations, they will be meaningless unless they are translated into the drafting of legislation and the drawing up of plans for implementation by local governments. In addition, preparation and coordination are essential for the organization of these assemblies. Tsukuba City Mayor Tatsuo Igarashi, who organized the city's citizens' climate assembly, emphasizes that this is a "cost of democracy," that we pay in order to create a fully-inclusive civil society. Nevertheless, he believes that numerous processes will be necessary in order to change national systems, and that local governments should be the ones taking the initiative.

There are many challenges to be faced in becoming "carbon neutral" by 2050, and there is a long road ahead of us. However, at a time when the waning of democracy is a subject of discussion throughout the world, it will be difficult to make progress in addressing the issue of climate change without cooperation from the local to the global level. I look forward to seeing the further development of citizens' climate assemblies in Japan.

(Note 1) https://citizensassembly.jp/project/cd_kaken/jp-list

(Note 2) <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2021/09/14/in-response-to-climate-change-citizens-in-advanced-economies-are-willing-to-alter-how-they-live-and-work/>

(Note 3) <https://survey.gov-online.go.jp/r02/r02-kikohendo/>

Professor Uno is an Executive Vice President of NIRA, and a Professor in The University of Tokyo's Institute of Social Science. He holds a Ph.D. in Law from The University of Tokyo's Graduate Schools for Law and Politics. Professor Uno specializes in the history of western political thought and political philosophy.

Expert Opinions

Discussion Involving Citizens Can Lead to Significant Changes in Society as a Whole



Naoyuki Mikami

Professor, Graduate School of
Environmental Studies,
Nagoya University

Seeking to achieve the goal of reducing greenhouse gas emissions to virtually zero by 2050, there has been widespread utilization of climate assemblies in Europe at the national and municipal levels since around 2019. Climate assemblies are realized via the holding of “mini-publics,” deliberative meetings between randomly-selected members of the public. Their purpose is to involve the public, including previously uninterested segments of the public, in encouraging change in society as a whole.

In Japan, since our first trial in Sapporo in 2020, municipalities in different areas throughout the country have begun to utilize climate assemblies. Participants are randomly selected to create a microcosm of the entire community in terms of characteristics such as age, gender, and area of residence. Thus far, most climate assemblies in Japan have been held once a month for about half a day, for a total of about five meetings.

The participants discuss how to promote decarbonization in their city or town, receiving information from experts on multiple predetermined themes, including energy, housing, mobility, community development, and food. The results are compiled in the form of policy recommendations and used by local governments to address climate change and other issues.

The reason for the high expectations for this method is that the conventional system of social decision-making has tended to put long-term issues such as climate change on the back-burner. In the current democratic system, such factors as the holding of elections every few years and the influence of constituencies and industry lobbies mean that the horizons of politicians responsible for policy-making tend to be narrowly limited in time and space. Therefore, it is hoped that by having randomly-selected participants engage in deliberation on the basis of unbiased information, the concerns and anxieties of the public regarding climate change can be brought into the open, a wide range of perspectives on measures that should be adopted can be brought together, and this can influence policy decisions.

The key to effective use of climate assemblies is, first, to “set themes” that are appropriate for the specific area under consideration. Because major sources of CO₂ emissions and other factors differ from region to region, it is necessary to set themes that are suited to the actual conditions of that area. In addition, if the climate assembly is held by a municipality, it is important that the administration adopts the stance that it will be prepared to respond to the recommendations of the assembly and make practical use of its outcomes. This does not mean that all the recommendations of a citizens’ assembly must be accepted as is; it is also important to carefully explain the reasons for not being able to respond immediately or for giving priority to other ideas. Furthermore, I would like to emphasize the importance of public participation in the management of climate assemblies. Rather than being the responsibility of the local government alone, the planning and management of assemblies should be carried out in collaboration with citizens’ groups and similar organizations.

In Western Europe, national-level climate assemblies are already being held in most countries. Based on the fact that the method has already been used by municipalities in the country, Japan should also pursue the possibility of utilizing this method for national discussions toward the realization of a decarbonized society.

Professor Mikami specializes in environmental sociology and science and technology studies. He conducts practical research on public participation in environmental policy and science and technology, with a particular focus on mini-publics. In 2020, he organized Japan’s first climate assembly in Sapporo as part of a research project he headed. Since then, he has acted as an advisor for climate assemblies in other areas of Japan. Professor Mikami has held his current position since October 2023, after serving in positions including Specially-appointed Associate Professor in Hokkaido University’s Communicators in Science and Technology Education Program (CoSTEP) and Associate Professor in the same university’s Institute for the Advancement of Higher Education. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Studies.

Expert Opinions

Citizen Participation in National Policy Through Deliberative Discussion Among Citizens



Seita Emori

Professor, Institute for
Future Initiatives,
The University of Tokyo

Measures to address climate change are often viewed as the sacrifice of a comfortable and convenient lifestyle for the sake of the earth, but “putting up with” an eco-friendly lifestyle is not the essence of this issue. What is needed before making changes in individual lifestyles is to first change social rules and frameworks with a sense of urgency. To realize this goal, it will be important to make the process of changing social rules a decision-making process that is regarded by the public as legitimate. Citizens' climate assemblies can be expected to be of great significance in this regard.

Because these citizens' assemblies are attended by members of the general public who are selected by lottery, the opinions of a wide range of citizens with varying degrees of interest in the issue of climate change are presented, from those with a high level of interest to those with a low level.

Participants gain awareness through discussion, but that in itself is not the primary goal of these events. More important is that citizens who were not selected in the lottery have a feeling of acceptance of the outcome of the discussions, understanding that they could have been selected and that citizens like themselves were part of the discussions. Because a sense of the legitimacy of the democratic process is shared, it is easier to increase citizen support for the proposals made, even if they did not participate.

Japanese citizens are becoming increasingly concerned about the issue of climate change, but there are some noticeable differences between Japan and Europe. One of these is that in Japan, there is only a vague sense of crisis, typified by the idea that if temperatures continue to increase, our lives will become difficult; in Europe, by contrast, the problem of climate change is seen as part of a structure of injustice between nations and generations. There is, comparatively speaking, a shared understanding that it is poor countries and people, and future generations, that will be affected.

Another difference is that efforts are not being made at the national level as they are in the UK and France. In Europe, governments and parliaments are taking the initiative in holding citizens' climate assemblies in response to strong requests from citizens and environmental groups. France, in particular, has had some successes, such as proposals for legislation resulting from deliberative discussions at such assemblies.

In Japan, although there has been an increase in the number of local government-led citizens' climate assemblies, where the head of the administration acts as the leader and residents make the assemblies happen, there has been no progress in establishing public meetings considering national policies. The only exception is the 2012 discussion regarding the national energy mix after the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant accident, which was seen as a special case. In the future, the government should seriously consider initiatives enabling citizens' voices to be taken into consideration in policy discussions.

Professor Emori specializes in climate science, specializing in future projections and risk assessment in relation to global warming. He is one of the lead authors of the 5th and 6th Assessment Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. He has worked at the National Institute for Environmental Studies (NIES) since 1997, including as Chief of the Climate Risk Assessment Section, Center for Global Environmental Research, and as Senior Principal Researcher from 2022. Since the same year, he has been a professor in The University of Tokyo's Institute for Future Initiatives (a cross-appointment with the NIES). He holds a Ph.D. from The University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. Professor Emori has authored numerous books and is actively involved in promoting public understanding of global warming, including writing the bi-monthly series “For Climate Regeneration” in the magazine SEKAI (“World”) in 2023.

Expert Opinions

Deliberative Discussion Results in Climate Change Being Viewed as a “Personal Matter”



Akane Iwasaki

Assistant Professor, Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences, The University of Tokyo

I have served as a facilitator at municipal citizen’s climate assemblies in Sapporo, Kawasaki, Atsugi, Tsukuba, and other cities. My role is to connect the global theme of climate change with the participants’ awareness of the issue, elicit their opinions, and facilitate the meetings. The meetings are held about six times in total, but in the first one or two sessions, participants tend not to see the issue as a “personal matter.” They have no objection to living an eco-friendly lifestyle within the scope of their ability, but when I tell them that “The essential measure is to take action to change society,” their response is surprise that they might be playing that role. Through a carefully designed process of deliberative discussion, even these participants gradually come to see the issue as personal, and begin to look at what they can do to help society and their community. After the assemblies, some participants came to think that while

decarbonization was not an issue in the election, in the next election they would like to see a focus on the candidates’ stance on climate change.

The issue of climate change is not one that becomes personal merely through the provision of information. While it is necessary to provide accurate scientific facts, rather than passive acquiescence to countermeasures, it will be important to encourage a forward-looking perspective, looking towards the creation of future cities that are comfortable to live in, while protecting the environment and nature enabling us to live prosperous lives. When we change the way we face the situation, it will be easier to come up with concrete ideas.

The management of citizens’ assemblies differs from municipality to municipality. The first thing that I have gathered from these differences is the importance of citizen-led management of the assemblies. In Atsugi City, citizen-based volunteer groups served as the nucleus, making it easier to connect results to further activities when the series of assemblies concluded. Ideally, people who contribute to their community should become members of the executive committee and be involved in the management of the assembly, with input from experts. The second thing is the involvement of the administration. It is desirable that the proposals made at the assembly be accepted and utilized in a meaningful way, rather than merely floating in the air. The third thing that strikes me is the role of experts. Preliminary design, including the identification of issues to be discussed and the information to be provided, is extremely important, and only experts can do this. How the agenda is set looking towards the goal, and the method of proceeding, make a significant difference to the outcome of the assembly. The involvement of a diverse group of people while local citizens take the lead will ensure the effectiveness of the assembly.

Although face-to-face meetings have increased since the end of the pandemic, I believe that there is great potential for online meetings from the perspective of lowering the hurdles to participation by a diverse group of people.

Specializing in environmental philosophy and ethics, Professor Iwasaki is particularly involved in putting into practice a range of interactive dialogues related to the environment, acting as a mediator between research and the broader society. She has served as a facilitator for numerous Japanese municipalities in citizen’s climate assemblies. She gained considerable experience as a science communicator at the National Museum of Emerging Science and Innovation (Miraikan), building bridges between experts and the general public. After working at the Social Dialogue and Co-production Office of the National Institute for Environmental Studies, she became a specially-appointed Assistant Professor in the One Earth Guardians Development Program of The University of Tokyo’s Graduate School of Agricultural and Life Sciences, in 2022, and has held her current position since 2023. She holds a Ph.D. in sociology.

Expert Opinions

Citizens' Climate Assemblies May Achieve a Breakthrough Towards Questioning the Roots of the Social System



Kimiko Hirata
Executive Director,
Climate Integrate

The peculiar difficulty of the issue of climate change is that, in addition to being a challenge of such magnitude as to remake human civilization, it is a systemic problem in a complex relationship with social, economic, and industrial structures. Particularly in Japan, the large number of actors involved serves as an excuse to evade the issue, and individual citizens do not have a sense of personal involvement. The government sees it as a problem for the U.S. and China, corporations see it as a government problem, and individual citizens evade the problem, believing that there is little that they can do about it. I have felt disappointed many times that even in the event of a nuclear accident, even when diplomatic pressure is applied, in Japan the pendulum swings back to the status quo after the situation has been rectified.

Against this background, I was somewhat skeptical at first about the movement towards the holding of citizens' climate assemblies by regional administrations, but little by little, I am beginning to have some hope. If citizen-participatory processes are established and administrations follow through with a certain determination to utilize the results of those processes in the formulation of initiatives, this could be a way to achieve a "breakthrough" in a variety of issues in Japan from the local level. I feel that this possibility is beginning to open up in this country.

I believe that citizens' climate assemblies have significance in bridging "three gulfs": first, they will be a means of bridging the gulf between the major social issue of climate change and citizens' awareness of the issue, making it possible for each individual to consider the issue as his or her own. Although the issue of climate change is one that requires a complete transformation of the social system, the problem is so large that it is difficult for anyone to feel that they are an involved party. Citizens' climate assemblies will allow us to overcome this situation. Second, they bridge the gulf between policymakers and citizens and open the way for collaboration involving citizen participation. In particular in Japan, the political and decision-making systems that direct policy formation are still fixed on actors from the era of economic growth. Citizen participation disrupts the existing vertical decision-making structures. Third, they will create opportunities to explore ways to bridge the gulf between the current fossil fuel-dependent world and the future we want to achieve.

The challenge in Japan lies in the lack of basic awareness of the issue of climate change among citizens, businesses, local governments, and the government. In the process of education, the question as to whether "what was commonsense in the past may not apply to the future, and we need to question our social and economic structure" is not asked, and neither adults nor children have the mindset to challenge themselves to do anything more than diligently conserve energy. Unless Japan grasps the issue as a structural systemic challenge and faces it with a sense of urgency, it will not be able to address the problem of questioning the roots of the system. Citizens' climate assemblies in each of the nation's regions could represent a breakthrough in this effort.

Dr. Hirata is the Executive Director of Climate Integrate, an independent climate policy think tank. After working for an environmental organization in the U.S., from 1998 to 2021 she worked for the NPO Kiko Network, engaged in research, analysis, advocacy, and the dissemination of information on international negotiations, and domestic and international climate change and energy policy. In 2022 she founded Climate Integrate. In collaboration with domestic and international partners, Climate Integrate supports the efforts of a variety of stakeholders to move towards decarbonization. Dr. Hirata received the 2021 Goldman Environmental Prize for her efforts to halt plans to build coal-fired power plants. She holds a Ph.D. in Social Sciences.

Expert Opinions

Realizing a “Fully-inclusive” Civil Society Through Deliberative Discussion, with Local Governments Taking the Lead



Tatsuo Igarashi
Mayor of Tsukuba City

Tsukuba City has implemented a variety of environmental initiatives, such as subsidies for energy conservation in the home, as part of its policies on climate change issues, but I felt that these alone were insufficient. Therefore, we launched the “Citizens’ Climate Assembly Tsukuba,” a mechanism to link the results of deliberative discussions among citizens to policies.

This is my first experience of a citizens’ climate assembly, and I believe it is a very effective mechanism. In addressing the issue of climate change, the most important thing is to encourage citizens to change their behavior. Proposals arising from deliberative discussion among citizens carry a different weight from government-led planning documents, and provide a strong basis for encouraging change in behavior. The recommendations made by the Citizens’ Climate Assembly will be carefully reviewed in their entirety by the city, and the city will prepare an implementation plan in the form of a roadmap.

In addition, a diverse range of citizens have participated in the Citizens’ Climate Assembly, including those who have not in general displayed an interest in policy. Using conventional methods such as “town meetings,” the voices of the silent majority, those who would not necessarily participate on their own devices, cannot be heard. By contrast, the Citizens Climate Assembly is highly significant because in having citizens selected by the drawing of lots participate, it allows for the free expression of opinions, and for proposals to be heard. In recent years, there has been growing concern that extreme, discriminatory and exclusionary discussions on the Internet may influence policy. I believe that in order to build a “fully-inclusive” civil society, we must engage in deliberative discussions through dialogue, rather than being swayed by loud voices on the Internet.

However, preparing the necessary information for participants with different levels of knowledge and setting an appropriate agenda involves considerable man-hours (i.e., a large number of processes) in preparation and coordination in advance, and the hurdle for implementation is therefore not low. Although it would be easier to recruit citizen members to attend the meetings of specialized councils and conduct community briefings and questionnaire surveys as has been done in the past, I believe that the organization of citizens’ climate assemblies is, so to speak, a “cost of democracy” that must be paid in order to create a fully-inclusive civil society.

I believe that citizens’ climate assemblies will spread nationwide in the future. If this happens, as we do what we can as local governments, we can link the movement to overall changes in the country. Changing national systems will involve a large number of processes, and a range of adjustments of interests must also be advanced. We cannot wait for the national government to push forward with this. Local governments must actively take the lead.

Dr. Igarashi is the mayor of Tsukuba City, in Ibaraki Prefecture. After serving two terms on the Tsukuba City Council, he was elected to his current position in 2016. He is currently serving his second term as Mayor. He graduated from the University of Tsukuba’s College of International Studies with a Bachelor’s degree in International Studies and took an M.Sc. degree in public policy from University College London. He completed his graduate studies at the Graduate School of Business Sciences, Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Tsukuba, taking a Ph.D. in International Political Economy. Mayor Igarashi announced the “Tsukuba City Zero Carbon City Declaration” in 2022, aiming to realize a decarbonized society, and realized the holding of the “Citizens’ Climate Assembly Tsukuba” in 2023, a citizens’ assembly, participation in which is based on the drawing of lots. He received the Manifesto Promotion Award for Excellence in the Manifesto Awards, which recognizes outstanding efforts by politicians. He was also selected as an OECD Champion Mayor by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.