

This is about every child's future!' Can Citizens' Assemblies support the Realisation of Children's Participation Rights in Environmental Governance?

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We are a team of researchers from University College Cork and Dublin City University in Ireland investigating the experiences of children and young people who were involved in Ireland's Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss in 2022.

The Assembly was set up by the Irish Government to run alongside a citizens' assembly with the adult population on how Ireland should tackle biodiversity loss. A citizens' assembly involves a random group of people coming together to help decide what a country should do about a difficult problem, helping to make sure decisions take consideration of the views of people from different walks of life.

35 children and young people aged 7-17 from across Ireland reflecting a variety of backgrounds were randomly chosen from over 500 applications. The Assembly was designed and facilitated by a group of adults working with 9 Young Advisors. The members learned about biodiversity loss and created 58 'calls to action' on what Ireland should do about the issue.

Learn more about the Assembly at:
cyp-biodiversity.ie

What did our research involve?

Children and young people involved in the Assembly took part in group discussions about their experiences of the process. One year later, we held more group discussions to explore the impact it had had on them individually, on their families, in their communities, and on wider policy and governance. Their parents/carers were also invited to participate in a separate group interview to share their views too.

Our analysis explored the impacts of children and young people's participation in the Assembly at personal, social and political levels. It also considered how it supported self-efficacy (belief in one's ability to affect change) and collective efficacy (belief in a group's ability to affect change).

Our research questions:

- Can citizens' assemblies help children and young people realise their rights to have a say in environmental governance and action?
- How can we evaluate and evidence the different impacts of their participation in citizens' assemblies?

What we learned

...and why this matters

1

Children and young people can make significant contributions to the shaping of environmental decision making. This research highlights that the Assembly supported children and young people to understand and discuss environmental issues, and provided them with a space to meaningfully share their views.

"...The Assembly was kind of a celebration of the essence of children's rights because this was about us and what we wanted our future to be like. This is about every child and their rights...hopefully it will mean that more children are going to start speaking out like we did."
- Assembly participant, female, age 16

2

Children and young people want decision makers and other adults to listen and act. Participants in this research said they often feel ignored when it comes to big issues like climate change and biodiversity. The Assembly made them feel included, respected and heard. However, participants also shared that they feel opportunities to meaningfully participate in decision making are limited.

3

Working together helps children and young people feel comfortable and confident. The Assembly was co-designed with Young Advisors making it feel enjoyable and accessible. Because they were supported by adults, given clear information and discussion time, the participants felt more confident in developing and voicing their opinions during and beyond the Assembly.

4

Participation encourages a sense of environmental responsibility and collective action. Through the Assembly, participants developed a collective identity as citizens and activists with the ability to make and influence environmental change in their communities, and at a national and international level.

5

Citizens' assemblies can support children and young people to experience their rights and empower them as agents of change. This form of public participation allows children and young people to exercise their right to participate in decisions that affect them, and develop the knowledge, skills and passion to take action within their communities and beyond.

"The participative process that they designed is, I believe, replicable across all areas of public policy where the views of children and young people are sought. We should be doing much more of this. To say that they had an impact on public policy making would be an understatement."
- Minister Malcom Noonan, TD, 2024

6

Longer-term impact evaluation is important. By focusing only on short-term impacts, we risk overlooking the broader potential for participation processes to lead to long-term citizen engagement in environmental action.