

Online Participation in Climate Policy

A guide to engaging stakeholders digitally

SUMMARY

As National Determined Contributions (NDC) are currently being reviewed and updated, 2020 is a decisive year to strengthen the Paris Agreement and to intensify global action to achieve the goals it sets out. Policy makers, however, are currently facing the challenge of tailoring stakeholder engagement and the meaningful participation of civil society in NDC review processes to the new reality of the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Yet, civil society organisations are crucial in identifying the many synergies and linkages from ambitious climate policies and measures to a socially just and green recovery from the current COVID-19 pandemic, and to gather support from society and the political commitment to implement them.

In times when physical face-to-face meetings are not practicable, online participation formats, if designed properly and used in combination with outreach tools, can be a suitable option to ensure that the review of the NDCs is participatory. This paper presents key aspects and guidelines for using online formats and tools as an integral part of a successful participation process that is transparent, inclusive from the beginning, and facilitated by an institutionalized body. It needs to be stressed that most of the same criteria to ensure the meaningful participation of civil society still apply when choosing online options: Stakeholders must be thoroughly mapped, the engagement practices need to be planned carefully, and accessibility has to be ensured accordingly. A well organised participatory process makes use of the best available and accessible methods for inclusive participation.¹

The following **key principles**, which are described in more detail below, **should improve online participation in climate policy**:

CONTINUITY: Develop online participation in climate policy as a continuous process consisting of different phases

ENGAGEMENT: Enable active online discussions instead of merely collecting opinions

TRANSPARENCY: Use the digital space to make participation in decision-making processes transparent and widely accessible

¹ BUND (2019): *Civil Society Engagement for Ambitious NDCs: Opportunities and challenges of civil society involvement in the update and implementation of Nationally Determined Contributions*. 2019: BUND Policy Paper. www.bund.net/cop25-zivilgesellschaft

Most participation processes in recent times have incorporated some sort of online format or tool, e.g. video conferencing or online surveys. Even if the whole participation process takes place online, it should follow the same criteria and make use of similar formats as its offline equivalents – the main difference between the two options being the tools used to make it happen. Hence, it is still necessary to thoroughly map the stakeholders in climate policy. Established civil society organisations can help to identify relevant organisations. Engagement practices need to be planned carefully and have barrier-free access. Acceptance among stakeholders for the jointly developed policies is ensured by making use of the best available and most accessible inclusive participatory methods². Generally, digital tools can improve the participatory process, as shown by the examples presented in this paper. It needs to be noted however, that not every process can be simply moved online, as some societal groups could be excluded due to a lack of access to the virtual space.

“CLIMATE ASSEMBLY UK”

What is it?

A citizens' committee established by the House of Commons to explore how the UK can reach zero GHG emissions by 2050.

Good practice regarding online tools

- Finalises its recommendations through video conferences with scientific input and discussions

Several of the participatory formats for the development and implementation of climate policies that were established before COVID-19 have proven to be flexible and creative, and have continued to function also during the pandemic. A good practice example

THE FRENCH “CONVENTION CITOYENNE POUR LE CLIMAT”

What is it?

The Citizens' Convention on Climate was initiated by the French president after a proposal for a form of deliberative democracy made by the “gilets jaunes” (yellow vest protestors). The members shall formulate propositions to “reduce the French emissions of greenhouse gas by at least 40 % compared to 1990, in a spirit of social justice”.

Good practice regarding online tools

- Video conferences and other online tools are used to specify its recommendations about the financing of climate measures
- Guidelines about decision-making procedures are available online
- Interim results, final results and (video) recordings of the convention's discussions are accessible on an intuitive online platform

is demonstrated by the *Climate Assembly UK* which finalises its recommendations through video conferences with scientific input and discussions³. The French Citizens' Convention on Climate (*Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat*) uses online tools such as video conferences to inform the public about its work and to specify its recommendations about financing climate measures. The members of the convention largely agree that their proposals for a climate-friendly future will also support the economy and labour market, thus supporting economic recovery in a post-COVID-19 world.⁴

Participation processes in (local and) national climate policy development and implementation, including their online features, were assessed within the project *Strengthening civil society in the implementation*

² *Ibid.*

³ <https://www.climateassembly.uk/news/climate-assembly-uk-complete-its-work-path-net-zero-through-online-video-conferencing/> (23.06.2020)

⁴ <https://www.mouvement-up.fr/articles/ou-en-est-la-convention-citoyenne-pour-le-climat/> (08.05.2020)

of national climate policies in Georgia, Colombia and Ukraine⁵, which aims to support civil society organisations in their efforts towards establishing more ambitious climate policies. The results show significant differences in the scope and quality of the digital elements of current public participation worldwide.

The following **key principles of planning and implementing online participation in climate policy** will allow governmental agencies to make the most of civil society's creativity and expertise to make climate policies more ambitious.

1. Develop online participation in climate policy as a continuous process consisting of different phases

Online participation must be more than a single video conference or web-based questionnaire. Instead, it should be set up as a continuous process. A good online participation process consists of the following phases: **Education Phase – Deliberation Phase – Decision Phase**⁶.

1) EDUCATION PHASE

Create a common understanding of the scientific background and context and of the existing space and rules of decision making.

2) DELIBERATION PHASE

Organized as an activating online discussion which allows participants to hand in own proposals, to exchange ideas and to find compromises.

3) DECISION PHASE

Jointly set up and edit mutually agreed proposals for climate policies and to define priorities among these actions.

For digital participation designed as a virtual citizen assembly, the **education phase** is important because it gives participants an understanding of the scientific background and context of climate change policies. Even online participation formats designed as expert roundtables should ideally start with educative elements to create a common basis of understanding among all participants for the process that follows. The presentation of the scope and mandate of the participation process is another essential part of the education phase. It informs participants about the existing space for decision-making, which is defined by different (and sometimes mutually exclusive) options, including a set budget and the legal framework. Communicating this framework clearly is crucial to initiating a fruitful discussion among participants.

To set up the education phase of a participatory process digitally, it is necessary to prepare easily understandable online manuals that form the basis for the deliberation and decision phases, and to invite experts from government institutions and academia to provide an introduction to the process, explaining its scope and mandate via online presentations plus virtual Q&A sessions.

The purpose of the **deliberation phase** is not to create a wish list of climate policies. Instead, it should enable participants to take a reality-check of their own proposals, to jointly find priorities among policy options, and to find compromises between different interests. A properly designed online deliberation phase allows participants to present own proposals, exchange ideas, find compromises, and create mutually agreed drafts of recommended climate policies.

5 https://www.international-climate-initiative.com/en/details/project/strengthening-civil-society-in-the-implementation-of-national-climate-policies-in-georgia-colombia-and-ukraine-18_l_327-2963?iki_lang=en

6 <https://twitter.com/NetZeroUK/status/1250450504011984896/photo/1> (14.05.2020)

A successful **decision phase** can be set up in a digital format with both commercial and free/open source software options that allow document sharing and online voting. This enables participants to draft and jointly edit their proposals and priorities, thereby coming up with their own solutions instead of merely rubber-stamping drafts and decisions pre-defined by government agencies.

In all phases of an online participation process, the combined use of a broad range of online tools and formats should be planned from the start. This allows participants to follow the process and maintains their interest in contributing towards the development and prioritisation of climate policies.

Ideally, all three phases should be accompanied by scientists and experts providing general and scientific information immediately if needed, and supporting in the formulation of the proposals. Independent fact-checkers are available to eradicate doubts if participants of online discussions have divided opinions on the scientific evidence to back up arguments.

It should ideally be possible to integrate proposals from citizens who are not directly participating but still want to contribute in the online process. It's crucial that these external inputs are forwarded to the participants in such a way that they remain manageable regarding both number and complexity.

This also means that during the preparation of (online) formats, measures must also be taken to successfully integrate those who do not have or have very limited access to digital technology and internet infrastructure, as is the case in many rural and/or indigenous communities. Additional outreach activities (e.g. surveys, meetings and telephone consultations) are a first step to engage these stakeholders as well and include their valuable contributions. Another step is the provision of technical equipment for those who do not have any, including providing instructions on

how to use it, written in a style that is professional, yet easy to understand.

What is essential for every online participation process is easy access to technical support which is available to all participants during the whole process.

2. Enable active online discussions instead of merely collecting opinions

Successful online participation usually generates added value when it contains inclusive and deliberative elements such as discussions between participants to jointly choose between several options and courses of action. The exchange of ideas and proposals, as well as sharing the reasons and motivation for rejecting certain measures, leads the way to compromise, which in turn leads to mutually agreed priorities in the climate policy options. A digital exchange such as this should be moderated by an independent chairperson in a way that fairly allocates an opportunity to speak to each person. The technology for such active online discussions is broadly available: In addition to commercial options, there are several open source tools to host moderated online roundtable discussions, working group discussions and conferences. They include options to hold smaller breakout sessions, thereby enabling participants to discuss some of the aspects in question in more detail. Prolonged speaking times can be avoided and intermediate results recorded through online minutes, ballots and timers.

3. Use the digital space to make participation in decision-making processes transparent and widely accessible

The negotiation and decision-making process is not always transparent with closed-door face-to-face participation formats. This can be improved significantly by using digital platforms to make the mandate, structure and guidelines of the participatory format, as well as all of its phases and results, transparent to all interested citizens. To achieve this, the following principles must be considered:

COMBINE A BROAD RANGE OF TOOLS

Plan processes in such a way that people who rarely or never use digital technology are still able to participate, for example through:

- Additional outreach activities including surveys, meetings and telephone consultation
- Ensure that participation is possible with smart phones and simple electronic devices
- Provide easily accessible “first aid”-style online support which is available to all participants during the whole participatory process

PROVIDE TRANSPARENT INFORMATION ON HOW THE PROPOSALS WERE CONSIDERED

Publish information about which of the proposals from the participatory process have been translated into climate policies, which have been modified and which have been declined and for what reason.

Visualize this information in an intuitive and easily accessible online platform, while also having this information readily available for requests from citizens who do not use digital technology.

ENSURE TRANSPARENCY REGARDING THE PROCESS AND RESULTS

Create a visually appealing and intuitive platform. Make the structure, guidelines and results of the participatory process transparent to a broader audience through:

- Providing booklets, videos and scientific presentations from the education phase
- Holding interviews with stakeholders
- Publishing videos and minutes from the discussions, the intermediate results and final outcomes

Citizen assemblies such as the French *Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat*, as well as stakeholder roundtables such as the Dutch *Klimaatakkoord*^{7 8} published their decision-making guidelines and procedures as well as all materials developed during the working phases online. This includes informative booklets, videos and scientific presentations from the education phase, interviews with facilitators, scientists and administrative personnel, an overview of how the budget was spent, as well as videos and minutes of discussions, intermediate results and final outcomes. Ensuring transparency is even easier to realize in a digital setting. In this context, digital transparency must be understood as a broad concept, which refers not only to making information accessible online via an intuitive and barrier-free platform, but also visually appealing and easily understandable.

Crucial for every participatory format, whether digital or face-to-face, is to let citizens and civil society know if and how their proposals were translated into government policies, and also why proposals were modified or not adopted at all. An example of this is when the government of Peru invited a large number of citizens, ethnic groups and civil society organisations to contribute towards formulating a new climate change law. The participatory process was called *Dialoguemos sobre el Reglamento de la Ley Marco sobre Cambio Climático*. Inputs from participants were made available online. The selection criteria and a decision matrix showing which inputs were included or rejected in the final texts were also published online. These texts were translated into five different indigenous languages, which still doesn't cover the vast linguistic diversity of the country but is certainly a step in the right direction and a vast improvement from previous participation processes. In times when the debate about a green and socially just economic recovery from COVID-19 is more pressing than ever,

7 <https://www.klimaatakkoord.nl/> (10.7.2020)

8 Further examples of participation in climate policy that make successful use of digital tools: Irish Citizen Assembly on How the State can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change (<https://www.citizensassembly.ie/en/>), Citizen and public participation in the Baden-Württemberg integrated energy and climate protection concept (<https://um.baden-wuerttemberg.de/>)

governments that have already established participatory (climate policy) networks and online platforms are far better equipped to open a targeted, yet inclusive online discussion about what this recovery should look like. The Dutch government for example, uses its *Klimaataakkoord* online participation and monitoring platform⁹ as a tool to bring together experts and representatives of civil society in order to collect and discuss ideas to answer this essential question online. However, online tools might not always be accessible to relevant groups of society and thereby hinder their participation. Further options to be involved need to be identified. For instance, telephone surveys and physical meetings might be better suited in some cases.

“DIALOGUEMOS SOBRE EL REGLAMENTO DE LA LEY MARCO SOBRE CAMBIO CLIMÁTICO” – PERU

What is it?

This participatory process collected and evaluated contributions from more than 2,000 people regarding the implementation of the climate change framework law in Peru. Citizens could participate in meetings for different stakeholder groups (indigenous people, youth, academics, private sector) in different regions, or send in their contribution via post.

Good practice regarding online tools

- The final draft of the elaborated document is available online in an audio format in five different indigenous languages
- Most parts of the process documentation are accessible online
- The review of recommendations from citizens is accessible online, as well as the indicators used for the evaluation of the inputs

“KLIMAATAKKOORD”: STAKEHOLDER ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS FOR THE NATIONAL CLIMATE AGREEMENT OF THE NETHERLANDS

What is it?

This participatory process in the Netherlands included more than 100 stakeholders at five sector roundtables to discuss measures and priority actions to reach the Netherlands' and the EU's emission targets.

Good practice regarding online tools

- Fairly comprehensive documentation of all important documents is published on the website: [klimaataakkoord.nl](https://www.klimaataakkoord.nl), and can be found through using a search engine
- Klimaataakkoord currently uses its online participation and monitoring platform to bring together experts and representatives from all sectors of civil society to collect and discuss ideas for a green recovery

Online formats nevertheless have the potential to complement offline participation and improve participation in terms of cost-efficiency, travel requirements, inclusiveness and accessibility. They are certainly a way to guarantee a minimum level of civil society participation in shaping climate policies when extraordinary circumstances like the current COVID-19 pandemic pose a barrier to traditional participation methods characterised by physical meetings. Further research is however necessary to thoroughly assess the advantages and disadvantages of engaging civil society actors in climate policy using online tools. It is also necessary to assess the most suitable combination of both online and face-to-face methods.

9 <https://www.klimaataakkoord.nl/> (10.7.2020)



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