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## **Observation report on the second citizens' assembly of the permanent citizens' dialogue in East Belgium**

Christoph Niessen, Rebecca Gebauer, Ann-Mireille Sautter &amp; Min Reuchamps

*For the attention of the Parliament of the German-speaking Community of Belgium,  
in particular the permanent secretariat of the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue.*

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## Context and observation methodology

As part of the Permanent Citizens' Dialogue initiated by Parliament, our research group was able to observe the process from a political science perspective from the outset with the consent of the Permanent Secretary. This report was written at her request in order to summarise our observations and, on this basis, to record both positive points and formulate suggestions for improvement.

This report contains our observations on the second citizens' assembly of the Citizens' Dialogue, which dealt with the topic "Inclusion goes to school! What changes do we need in education to make inclusion a win-win situation for everyone?". Our observations cover the course of the Citizens' Assembly from the first session in March 2021 to the second discussion with Committees 1, 3 and 4 in October 2021. Our suggestions are based primarily on our observations during the sessions. We also distributed questionnaires to the participants at various points in the process. Unfortunately, the latter were only completed by some of the citizens, meaning that the evaluation is only of limited value. They should be interpreted with the appropriate caution.

This report is divided into three parts. These are orientated towards the three basic aspects that the specialist literature considers to be crucial for a successful deliberative citizens' assembly.<sup>1</sup> Part 1 deals with the composition and thematic focus of the assembly, i.e. what is discussed and by whom. This is often referred to as the '*input*' of the process. Part 2 deals with the process and discussions in the session, i.e. the way in which exchanges take place and how decisions are reached. This is often referred to as the '*throughput*' of the process. Part 3 deals with the results of the session and their implementation, i.e. what is recommended, how this is justified and what is implemented politically. This is often referred to as the '*output*' of the process. Put simply, you could say that we look at what happened *before*, *during* and *after* the citizens' assembly. Finally, we formulate some concluding remarks.

### 1. Composition and thematic focus (input)

Two points are crucial for evaluating the input of a deliberative citizens' assembly: (1) the socio-demographic composition of the group of participants and (2) how the topic is chosen or adapted during the assembly.

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<sup>1</sup> See: Bekkers V. & Edwards A. (2007). Legitimacy and democracy: A conceptual framework for assessing governance practices. In V. Bekkers, G. Dijkstra, A. Edwards & M. Fenger (Eds.), *Governance and the Democratic Deficit: Assessing the Legitimacy of Governance Practices* (pp. 35-60). Aldershot: Ashgate; Caluwaerts D. & Reuchamps M. (2015). Strengthening democracy through bottom-up deliberation: An assessment of the internal legitimacy of the G1000 project. *Acta Politica*, vol. 50, n°2, pp. 151-170.

(1) The first session of the citizens' assembly was attended by 24 participants. From their introductions, it could be concluded that the group was diverse in terms of gender, age, place of residence and occupation. While there were still 22 participants at the second session, there were only 13 at the third (or 12 in the afternoon). At the fourth and final session, 14 members were present - roughly balanced in terms of gender and place of residence, but with few young people (1 under 25, 4 between 25-55). These 13 and 14 participants respectively were very committed and worked to the best of their knowledge and belief. Nevertheless, their small number poses a problem in that a topic can be explored in less depth with fewer members and the recommendations can only be supported by a (no longer diverse) proportion of the members. During the discussions, it also became apparent that quite a few members of the citizens' assembly have only been living in the German-speaking Community for a limited period of time. Although it is very much to be welcomed that these fellow citizens participate in the citizens' dialogue in large numbers, this sometimes led to the problem that they were only partially familiar with existing institutions and legislation in the Community (or the country).

(2) The topic of the citizens' assembly was freely selected by the citizens' council. This was based on an open survey of the population. Explicit attention was paid to narrowing down the topic and focussing on inclusion in education. This can be seen as positive, as the last citizens' assembly was already faced with the problem of dealing with a topic that was too broad (within the given time frame). During the citizens' assembly, the participants had the opportunity to adapt this topic framework again on the basis of their hearings and discussions or to concentrate on certain aspects. This was also done and was not influenced from outside.

**Suggestions:**

- Most of the members who were no longer present at the third and fourth sessions explained their absence to the permanent secretary due to coronavirus illness/concerns. We also do not consider it impossible that the difficult working conditions under the hygiene measures (see point 2) have also contributed to a reduction in motivation. It therefore remains important to systematically track why participants have stopped coming and, if possible, to respond to this.
- In order to avoid a citizens' assembly having to make decisions again due to cancellations with too few members, one could consider increasing the original number of participants. As far as we know, this has already been done at the third citizens' assembly.
- Consideration should also be given to setting a minimum number of participants - both for the discussion and for the decision on the recommendations. If too few participants are present, the session would be adjourned. We are aware that this is associated with the difficulty for the permanent secretary that she is often only informed very late about the non-attendance of members. Nevertheless, in view of the problems described above, we consider it necessary to postpone sessions with fewer than 15 members, for example. I also seem to have thought about this at the third citizens' assembly.

- In order to ensure that enough members of the Citizens' Assembly have experience with the institutions and legislation in the German-speaking Community and in Belgium, citizenship could be considered as a criterion in the drawing of lots. This not only ensures that there are enough members of Belgian nationality present, but also guarantees the opposite: that members of other nationalities are always included according to their proportion in the population of the German-speaking Community.

## **2. Progress and discussions (throughput)**

Four aspects are relevant for the throughput of a deliberative citizens' assembly: (1) a stimulating animation, (2) the involvement of all participants, (3) contextual independence and (4) consensus-orientated decision-making.

(1) The moderation of the citizens' assembly by Mr Enderle was, as in the first assembly, very professional. In addition, our previous recommendation for more work in subgroups was taken into account, which was reflected in the quality of the discussions. Several participants commented on the first day that they had not only been given a lot of input, but above all a lot of theoretical input. The discussions with "practitioners" (i.e. stakeholders/those affected - either from educational institutions or organisations) on the second weekend, on the other hand, were perceived very positively. While some experts specifically addressed at the end of their presentations what they consider to be positive and what is problematic in their work, others tended to remain exclusively positive. Nevertheless (and sometimes precisely because of this), many things were critically scrutinised by the participants - in some discussions, the tone of some participants was almost harsh. After each presentation in the sub-groups, interesting discussions arose briefly, but these had to be postponed as the next presentation was already scheduled. This was made up for on the third weekend and discussed in more depth in subgroups. To this end, the moderator summarised what had been heard the previous weekend. The small number of participants posed problems for the work in subgroups, as there were not enough participants available for all topics. As a result, there were six participants in one group, four in another and three in another. To support the latter, Mr Enderle moderated their discussions. On the third and fourth weekends, the participants already demonstrated expertise in many areas and exchanged ideas constructively, but various difficulties still arose. At the end of the third weekend, for example, some participants were still unable to categorise what the Service for Independent Living is and does. It was also not clear to some exactly how the citizens' dialogue works in its entirety and what happens to their recommendations. It was argued that although educational experts, service managers, ministry officials and stakeholders had been consulted so far, with the exception of one parents' association, there were only a few people affected and no children with disabilities. As far as the meeting venues were concerned, the large chapel of the Heidbergkloster enabled the first session to be held in a circle, which seemed to have a positive influence on the exchange and mutual perception of the participants.

At the same time, the acoustics made communication more difficult. The adherence to social distancing rules and the resulting limited opportunity for interactive discussion made it difficult to develop a real group dynamic. The same applies to the tight schedule (which was planned because no food could be served during the lunch break due to the coronavirus rules), which overtaxed some participants. The work in the Parliament of the German-speaking Community went much better. Unfortunately, due to the distancing rules, it was not possible to work in a circle and only partially interactively, but the acoustics were good and the atmosphere was warmer. The timetable was adjusted.

(2) The moderator endeavoured to involve all participants. This was successful for the majority of the group. Nevertheless, there were people who spoke very little and one person who, even on the second weekend, did not make a single comment either in the plenary session or in the subgroups. During the hearings, most of the participants were clearly endeavouring to follow what was being said. Some had the reflex to write down systematically. In most sessions, minutes were also taken by the permanent secretary as a working aid.

(3) The selection of persons to be heard was proposed for the first session by the Citizens' Council and the permanent secretary. Afterwards, the members of the Citizens' Assembly had the opportunity to make additional requests to be heard. Various educational experts, service managers, ministry officials and stakeholders were consulted. The wish to hear from more stakeholders was expressed, but was not shared by all participants due to the limited time frame and was ultimately not realised due to a lack of preparation.

(4) The decision-making process was consensus-orientated and based on the exchange of arguments. All points were dealt with thoroughly in subgroups and everyone had the opportunity to express their views. All points were dealt with in the plenary session, but only to a limited extent collectively due to time constraints.

#### **Suggestions:**

- Although keynote speeches on the first weekend seem interesting in order to impart topic-related knowledge directly to the participants, it should be borne in mind that at the beginning of a citizens' assembly, it is just as important to create a group dynamic and to record one's own initial uninfluenced intuitions. This was not possible in this citizens' assembly due to the coronavirus situation, but should not be disregarded for future assemblies.
- When hearing experts and stakeholders in the later weeks, the importance of small discussion moments between the hearings or at least later on the same day should not be underestimated. These help to deepen understanding and form initial arguments. It also promotes group dynamics. For example, you could organise short discussion moments directly after the presentations. Or schedule presentations only in the morning and discuss them further in the

afternoon. It is important that the main topics and priorities remain open until all the hearings are over.

- If this is not yet the case, experts could be asked in advance to repeat the most important points ('take-home messages') at the end of their presentation and to point out both positive points and points for improvement.
- During the hearings, all participants should be encouraged to take notes. There should not be a teacher-student relationship, but some participants have probably not taken notes systematically for a long time and could thus take away even more from what they have heard over the weekend.
- Three pillars of expertise must be established in the course of a citizens' assembly: (i) which institutions and legislation already exist in the topic area, (ii) what those affected think and (iii) what stakeholders think. The third pillar was covered a lot in the citizens' assembly, the first to some extent and the second only to a limited extent. This is not always easy in terms of time, but should also be kept in mind in the future and perhaps even explained to the participants at the beginning. If necessary, additional sessions can be considered if the need arises.
- The explanation of the Citizens' Dialogue itself was relatively brief in the first session. A more detailed explanation would certainly be useful here - not only on the pure functioning of the Citizens' Council and the Citizens' Assembly, but also on the responsibility and legitimacy that comes with it (that citizens have a great responsibility and must be aware of the consequences of their recommendations; that their legitimacy comes with their diversity and therefore the participation of all members to the end is very important). The permanent secretary could do this.
- When working in subgroups, it is certainly important to divide the participants according to their interests, as was done in the citizens' assembly. Nevertheless, care should be taken to ensure that the groups are balanced in terms of numbers or at least contain enough participants to be able to work effectively.
- The fact that most aspects of the recommendations are developed in subgroups is labour-efficient and promotes the quality of the discussion on each recommendation. Nevertheless, sufficient time should also be set aside in the plenary session to allow other participants to comment on and scrutinise the recommendations, so that all recommendations benefit from the diverse experiences and opinions of all participants and are collectively supported.
- Since, despite working in subgroups, there are still participants who only speak up a little and in order to further promote the discussion of the participants (pointing out the reasons for the arguments, reminding them of consequences, paying attention to the tone, etc.), one could think about moderation in important working moments of the subgroups. Here, the moderator could be supported by members of the parliamentary administration and the permanent secretary if necessary. Alternatively, if the budget allows, several moderators could also be considered.

### **3. Results and implementation (output)**

Three aspects are important for the output of a deliberative citizens' assembly: (1) answering the question, (2) involving and explaining the results to the public, and (3) the take-up the results politically.

(1) The citizens' assembly has always addressed the questions it was given, narrowed them down on the basis of its hearings and discussions and answered them accordingly with its recommendations.

(2) The results of the citizens' assembly were recorded in a final recommendation document and communicated transparently. The document is publicly accessible on the citizens' dialogue website. It includes a description of the process as well as the people consulted. For each recommendation group, the background and motivations were summarised in an introductory paragraph. In order to give the public an insight into the citizens' assembly beyond this written document, short video clips were filmed during the citizens' assembly in which the members introduce themselves and briefly explain what they did on the respective weekend.

(3) The recommendations of the citizens' assemblies were discussed in two joint meetings with Committees 1, 3 and 4. The first meeting was used for the presentation by the citizens' assembly, in the second meeting, the committees presented their response and implementation plans. The presentation of the results by the citizens' assembly was very professional. The main objective also seemed to have been achieved: to communicate clearly what was recommended and why. In the second meeting, the committees shared their concerns about some of the recommendations and therefore only agreed to implement some of the recommendations. Some of the citizens reacted sceptically to this and tried to explain again why they had come to the recommendations. As they had received the committees' reactions in advance, unlike at the first citizens' assembly, they were better prepared to respond. However, the limited time frame made it difficult to discuss this in depth together.

#### **Suggestions:**

- In order to go beyond the communication and justification of the recommendations in a written document and to reach a wider public, the recent positive experience with the video clips could be built upon. In addition to introducing the members and their experiences at the end of the citizens' assembly, the latter could also address the recommendations and their rationale.
- Some questions from the committee members were not only about understanding the recommendations, but sometimes also focussed on the background: who had been consulted and what problems had been identified. In order to share these experiences with the committee and thus further substantiate the recommendations, future written documents

could go beyond contextualising the recommendation groups and also share more about the difficulties identified. This could be done, for example, by presenting the (i) actual situation, (ii) problem, and (iii) target situation.

- If a recommendation is rejected, it could also be suggested that the committee itself hear the person(s) whose description of the problem prompted the citizens' assembly to formulate the recommendation.
- The two previous suggestions deal with the understanding between the citizens' assembly and the committee. There are difficulties in this regard because the two mainly work separately from each other. This is desirable insofar as citizens should be able to work independently and form their own opinions without being influenced. On the other hand, it is important that citizens and parliamentarians exchange views with each other sooner or later in order to share their mutual experiences. The joint committees were set up in the citizens' dialogue model for this purpose. However, the limited time frame and the nature of the meetings appear to make in-depth dialogue difficult. In the longer term, a reform of the model could therefore consider linking the work of the citizens' assembly and the committee more closely without sacrificing the independence of the citizens' work. For example, a pilot citizens' assembly could be organised in which the citizens meet alone on the first two or three weekends, listen to experts, form an opinion on the topic, and define initial priorities. On the third, fourth or fifth weekend, parliamentarians would then also be integrated into the assembly. On the one hand, this would allow them to contribute the experiences that led them to reject a recommendation in the separate committee, for example. Secondly, they would gain a deeper insight into the hearings, work and thought processes of the citizens' assembly. At the end of this pilot meeting, the success of the procedure would be evaluated.
- The joint committee meetings are open to the public so that the public can see and understand what happens with the results of the citizens' assembly. This is important and should be maintained. At the same time, at the very first (non-permanent) citizens' dialogue organised by Parliament on childcare, the informal exchange between citizens and parliamentarians at the end of the process was greatly appreciated by everyone involved. Perhaps consideration could be given to including such an informal exchange in the current permanent citizens' dialogue. After the first joint committee would be a possible moment for this, as the recommendations have already been presented there, but the committees have yet to respond.

### **Concluding remarks**

On the basis of the above observations and considerations, we can conclude that the citizens' assembly was conducted in a thoroughly positive manner - with an open and citizen-led choice of topics, a well-founded and deliberative exchange, and a transparent and well-founded discussion of recommendations. Our suggestions for improvement mainly concern the diversity of the assembly, the development of expertise and the collective validation of recommendations, as well as communication between the citizens' assembly and the committee.

The reason why the formulation of suggestions for improvement takes up a substantial amount of space in this report is that these are the most directly useful for the process. Similarly, it always takes more space to elaborate on a suggestion for improvement than to simply record what is already working well. However, this should in no way detract from the positive points noted.

Finally, we are also aware that it is always easier to formulate a proposal for improvement than to implement it. If desired, we are therefore available for further considerations in this regard - both to the Permanent Secretariat and the Citizens' Council as well as to the Parliamentary Bureau.

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