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# Business and the Climate Crisis: Toward Engagement With Climate Assemblies

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## Abstract

Businesses and business scholars interested in tackling climate change can benefit by engaging with the innovative but nascent movement of climate assemblies. I articulate three promising ways they can meaningfully engage with this movement.

## Keywords

climate change, stakeholder involvement (environmental)

By this point, most readers of *Business & Society* will be well aware of the urgency of reorienting academic research and management practice to more meaningfully engage with the issue of climate change—arguably the most significant issue facing us today. This will require significant shifts in the questions we ask, the ways we engage with interdisciplinary research and practice, and the assumptions that underpin our conception of the role of business in society (Nyberg et al., 2022; Nyberg & Wright, 2022). While we collectively wrestle with these changes, a growing number of citizens are meeting together to learn, deliberate, and make collective recommendations about climate change in a growing number of *climate assemblies* that aim to break the political gridlock around this urgent issue. Climate assemblies are

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part of a growing wave of deliberative democratic innovations sweeping much of the world that, up until now, have flown under the radar in our discipline. I argue that businesses and business scholars interested in meaningfully tackling climate change have much to learn from and contribute to this movement.

## What Are Climate Assemblies?

Climate assemblies have gained increased attention in policy-making and governance in recent decades (see Wells et al., 2021; Willis et al., 2022, for recent overviews). Their use has surged in recent years around the world and across various levels of government. Examples at the national level include *Climate Assembly UK* and the French *Convention Citoyenne Pour le Climat*, and those at the subnational level include the *Washington Climate Assembly* and the *Glasgow Citizens' Assembly on the Climate Emergency*. As a particular form of *deliberative mini-public*, they share several characteristics that distinguish them from other forms of citizen engagement. Perhaps most notably, they select participants using random selection (i.e., a civic lottery) so that participants collectively reflect the diversity of the focal population at large. These participants then learn and deliberate together with the goal of reaching some collective decisions, such as policy recommendations pertaining to the disclosure of climate impacts of different products, which are usually captured in a public report. Their learning is enabled through the careful provision of balanced and in-depth information in the form of written briefs and presentations from expert and stakeholder witnesses, with independent advisory boards providing feedback and support. Their deliberation is enabled through a range of practices that include facilitated small-group discussions.

Much of this interest can be attributed to the unique way they can contribute to policy-making on this complex and controversial issue. Willis and colleagues (2022) argue that climate assemblies can overcome many of the factors inhibiting robust government action on the climate crisis and, in so doing, develop bolder and more all-encompassing recommendations. For instance, compared with contemporary representative democratic systems, climate assemblies are better able to focus on the long-term and thoughtfully engage with scientific and technical insights pertaining to climate change. Wells and colleagues (2021) identified a range of indirect benefits, including generating a sense of momentum among representatives, legitimating more ambitious policies, and prompting a rethink of how citizens are engaged on this issue. We are arguably only at the nascent stages of this movement as scholars and practitioners continue to search for ways to improve the design of climate assemblies and maximize their impact.

## How Can Businesses and Business Scholars Engage With Climate Assemblies?

Despite growing interest in tackling climate change, businesses and business scholars have largely been silent on climate assemblies, which present a great opportunity to have an impact on climate change. I now turn to briefly overview three ways businesses and business scholars can engage with climate assemblies that vary in the extent to which they influence the process.

First, they could *use them as a source of input and inspiration*. While the recommendations from climate assemblies cover a wide range of topics, many of them have a close connection to the work of businesses and business scholars. In the case of the Washington Climate Assembly (2021), when it comes to businesses, participants' recommendations focused on topics including mandatory product carbon content disclosures and incentives to encourage businesses to participate in circular economies. Businesses could canvas and reflect on these recommendations as part of their strategy development efforts to develop more comprehensive and innovative sustainability strategies. Similarly, several recommendations touched on the need for additional research on the shift to a low-carbon economy and the need to better integrate climate change-related content into educational curricula. As such, they could serve as a valuable source of input and inspiration for business scholars seeking to redefine their research and teaching to tackle climate change (Nyberg & Wright, 2022). For instance, business scholars could use them to revise their lesson plans, reorient their research programs, and develop new research funding and assessment frameworks.

Second, they could *provide resources and support* for climate assemblies. While costs vary widely based on their design and scope, climate assemblies are more expensive than many common forms of public engagement. Typical expenses include the civic lottery process, facilitation, physical space, and honoraria. Businesses have access to a wide range of financial and nonfinancial (e.g., A/V technology, physical space) resources that they could donate. To protect the integrity and independence of climate assemblies—which is critical to their successful conduct and perceived legitimacy—businesses and industry groups should donate them to independent organizations that initiate, convene, or support climate assemblies as part of their remit. Similarly, business scholars could use their and their institutions' oftentimes-significant convening power to support the hosting and resourcing of climate assemblies by, for example, bringing together activists and policy-makers to generate interest in hosting such an assembly. Collectively, these types of engagement would help convene more climate assemblies that have sufficient resources to be of high quality. In doing so, they are a promising way in which businesses

and business scholars can support the revitalization of societal-level democracy (Goodman & Mäkinen, 2022).

Third, they could *serve as witnesses and advisers*, whereby they begin to influence the deliberations in targeted and contained ways. In light of the scope of climate assemblies, many businesses can undoubtedly be considered stakeholders whose operations are likely to be affected by particular recommendations. Both businesses and business scholars may also have relevant substantive expertise on key topics (e.g., on how specific technologies are used in practice). Subject to each assembly's unique procedures, they could put their name in the hat for consideration as stakeholder or expert witnesses, whereby they would share their perspectives and knowledge as part of the learning phase of climate assemblies, or as members of advisory boards, whereby they would provide feedback and support for this phase. Provided that conveners put in place practices to prevent co-optation and to ensure that all witnesses and advisers can participate on an equal footing, this type of engagement could help boost the quality of participants' deliberations by providing them with a broader array of information and perspectives to consider. In addition, they could help legitimate climate assemblies and secure more buy-in for their recommendations from businesses and industry groups (Kahane et al., 2013).

## **The Potential of Business and Business Scholars' Engagement With Climate Assemblies**

As businesses and business scholars wake up to climate change, a growing number of citizens around the world are meeting, learning, and deliberating together in climate assemblies. While the movement to convene these assemblies is nascent, it has the potential to break the political gridlock around climate change. This presents businesses and business scholars with a promising opportunity to deliver on growing calls to take climate change seriously and contribute to the revitalization of democracy in society. Their respectful, humble, and thoughtful engagement could help advance this movement and amplify its impact. While I have only been able to paint an initial sketch of what this engagement could look like in this commentary, I hope it spurs further research and reflection on the different forms this engagement could take, their respective merits and demerits, and their practical implementation and evolution.

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**Simon Pek** (PhD, Simon Fraser University) is associate professor of sustainability and organization theory at the Peter B. Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria. His primary current research focus is on how organizations can achieve their social and environmental objectives through the use of democratic innovations. His research appears in journals including *Academy of Management Review*, *Organization Science*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, and *Business Ethics Quarterly*. He currently serves as associate editor of the *Journal of Management Inquiry*.