EU-CIEMBLY
Democracy for All

POLICY BRIEF

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Integrating intersectionality in citizen participation

From assessment to piloting

Executive summary

Citizens' assemblies are increasingly used across Europe to enhance democratic legitimacy, public participation, and policy responsiveness. Yet, people belonging to multiple intersecting marginalised groups (PMIMGs) often continue to face structural barriers to participation, voice, and influence over policy-making, be it at local, national or European level. Evidence from the Horizon Europe project EU-CIEMBLY demonstrates that while many assemblies pursue diversity and inclusion, intersectionality is rarely addressed explicitly or systematically.

Drawing on an extensive mixed-methods evaluation of existing citizens' assembly practices across local, national, and EU levels, and on the design of the EU-CIEMBLY's intersectionality-oriented pilot assemblies, that are already underway, this policy brief presents evidence-based guidance for policymakers and practitioners. It shows how intersectional inequalities manifest across input, throughput, and output categories of design choices for participatory processes and how they can be addressed through targeted design interventions. The brief concludes with eight actionable policy recommendations aimed at integrating intersectionality considerations not only into citizen engagement initiatives, but also into public policy development across the European Union.

Background

Citizens' assemblies have consolidated their role as effective democratic innovations, with the OECD documenting over 733 representative deliberative processes globally between 1979 and 2023. At the same time, the issue of intersectionality has been emerging as a central dimension for designing and evaluating the quality of democratic innovations and participatory democracy processes.

Intersectionality refers to the ways in which multiple, overlapping systems of oppression and power, such as gender, race, class, disability, migration status, age, or sexuality, shape lived experiences. In participatory governance, this means that individuals do not experience barriers to participation in isolation, but through combined and mutually reinforcing forms of discrimination.

EU-CIEMBLY adopts intersectionality as both an analytical and normative lens, redefining democratic inclusion beyond formal equality and descriptive diversity. The project demonstrates that without an explicit intersectional approach, participatory processes risk over-representing already empowered groups, marginalising disadvantaged voices during deliberation, and producing recommendations that insufficiently address structural inequalities.

This policy brief draws on two aspects of the project. First, on the systematic evaluation of citizens' assembly practices conducted by the project team and documented in EU-CIEMBLY Deliverable 3.3. Second, on the intersectionality-informed design of three pilot citizens' assemblies to be implemented between February and December 2026. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 15 assembly practitioners, secondary analysis of participant evaluation data from Scotland and Catalonia's climate assemblies, evaluation of EU Citizens' Panels, and the design development for the pilots, this brief presents best practices and actionable recommendations for policymakers.

Statement of the Issue

Citizens' assemblies have emerged as powerful democratic innovations, bringing together randomly selected citizens to deliberate on complex policy challenges. However, these processes may sometimes lead to the so-called 'paradox of participation' (where increased opportunities for public involvement in decision-making often lead to reinforcement of existing power structures, rather than genuine empowerment of grass-roots citizens).

That is precisely the issued tackled by the EU-CIEMBLY project. Indeed, most existing practices operate through single-axis approaches to inclusion, focusing on discrete categories such as gender, age, or socio-economic status, and do not capture how these categories overlap and mutually reinforce the cumulative disadvantage for effective political participation. This means that citizens' assemblies risk reproducing existing power imbalances when intersectional marginalisation is not explicitly addressed. Persons belonging to multiple intersecting marginalised groups, such as low-income women of colour or young migrants, face multiple barriers to participation that standard diversity measures do not capture. These barriers may manifest across all assembly stages, in the form of limited power in agenda-setting, internal exclusion during deliberation due to dominant communication norms, and lack of mechanisms to ensure their perspectives influence outcomes.

In the context of citizens' assemblies, intersectionality shifts the analytical focus from individuals to structures of power, from formal equality to substantive equality, and from numerical diversity to relational inclusion and voice. This reframing challenges the assumption that randomly selected, demographically representative groups will automatically produce equitable deliberation. Instead, it highlights how institutional design choices, from recruitment methods to facilitation styles, can either mitigate or reproduce social hierarchies. Through systematic evaluation of three core qualities, namely intersectional equality, inclusion, and good deliberation, across input (who participates, topic selection, information provision), throughput (deliberation processes, facilitation, consensus-building), and output (recommendations, implementation, evaluation) design stages, the EU-CIEMBLY project's research identifies both shortcomings and opportunities for a more effective citizens' assembly design (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. EU-CIEMBLY Framework for an Intersectionality-Oriented Citizens' Assembly

EU-CIEMBLY Framework for an Intersectionality-Oriented Citizens' Assembly				
1- Analytical and normative dimension	Intersectionality as an analytical lens informs the **qualities** of:			INTERSECTIONALITY
	Equality	**Inclusion**	**Good deliberation**	
2- Categorising dimension	Which are then used to inform citizens' assembly **design choices**, categorised according to:			
	Input choices	**Throughput choices**	**Output choices**	
3- Operationalising dimension	Which are incorporated through one or more of the **models for operationalising** intersectionality in citizens' assemblies			
4- Evaluation and recommendations dimension	Which then inform the development of:			
	An Intersectionality-Oriented Citizens' Assembly			

At the same time, intersectionality as a concept has become increasingly relevant to policymakers as a crucial governance instrument, particularly at EU level. EU legislation and policies seek to address complex, cross-cutting challenges that affect citizens unevenly, from climate transition, to digitalisation, to social cohesion, to housing. Without intersectionality-oriented policy input, participatory processes risk overlooking the most affected populations and reinforcing structural inequalities through ostensibly neutral measures.

Summary of Findings

Evaluation of existing citizens' assemblies

Interview data demonstrates that sortition methods, though perceived as neutral, fail to account for historical discrimination and systematic

oppression that affect response rates across different social groups. Thus, not only is it crucial to explore non-sortition based approaches to ensure higher numbers of participants from the intersection of marginalised groups, but also to focus on topic selection as an important entry point for inclusion. Practitioners emphasised the importance of broad framing questions and early engagement with less-heard groups to ensure topics resonate with diverse populations and avoid exclusionary starting points.

Secondary analysis of participant evaluation data from Scotland's and Catalonia's climate assemblies reveals that participants from PMIMG backgrounds often face compounded barriers to full participation, including lower confidence in expressing views and reduced perception of influence on outcomes. To counter that, attention must be paid to facilitator practices, which can significantly impact equality of voice, and to iterative, dialogic approaches to consensus-building which better surface minority voices and positions and avoid tokenism. The evaluation of EU Citizens' Panels shows promising developments, including discussion principles that explicitly address power, privilege, and positionality, asking participants to be aware of when they are speaking more than others and to intentionally create space for quieter voices.

Regarding the output stage, the research identifies gaps in how assembly outputs represent diverse perspectives. Traditional recommendation formats risk obscuring minority positions and the experiences of all participants. There is also limited accountability for how recommendations affect different social groups. Practitioners emphasised the value of including participant-authored elements, such as personal letters, forewords, or narrative accounts, alongside formal recommendations to convey overarching goals, lived experiences, and dissenting views.

Building on these findings and on the analytical and normative framework developed, the EU-CIEMBLY project will implement three pilot citizens' assemblies between February and December 2026 at local, national, and transnational levels. These pilots explicitly integrate intersectional principles of equality, inclusion, and deliberation into every design choice, offering practical demonstrations of how theory translates into practice.

Designing inclusive citizens' assembly pilots

The EU-CIEMBLY project designed three pilot citizens' assemblies, local (Colchester, UK), national (Cyprus), and transnational (EU-wide), each testing targeted interventions to embed intersectionality considerations (Fig. 2). All three pilots address housing policy, selected for its relevance to marginalised communities and connection to current policy priorities.

Figure 2. An overview of the pilots' design

An Overview of the Pilots' Design			
Level	Local pilot	National pilot	Transnational pilot
Targeted Intervention	Community co-design	Intersectionality-driven recruitment and/or content	Enclave deliberation inspired by the deeply affected principle
Cross-cutting intervention	Facilitation		
Intersectionality guiding design choices	• Intersectionality as an analytical framework based on power relations understood in the relevant context • Awareness of our own positionality		

Local pilot: power sharing and co-design

The Colchester pilot adopts a bottom-up approach inspired by community organising principles, partnering with Citizens UK Essex and the University of Essex Students' Union. Co-design workshops with community representatives have shaped the assembly's framing, recruitment strategies, and ground rules. This tests whether power-sharing in assembly governance and direct engagement with decision-makers can enhance intersectional equality and ensure impact.

National pilot: descriptive and discursive representation

Cyprus's first national citizens' assembly tests innovations in recruitment and content provision. Rather than standard sortition alone, the pilot explores two approaches: implementing intersectionality-informed quotas ensuring representation at social group intersections, and reaching out to civil society organisations (CSOs) who bring marginalised perspectives into deliberation as experts or witnesses. Both strategies address limitations of conventional demographic representation by emphasising lived experiences of intersectional marginalisation specific to Cyprus's housing crisis, which disproportionately affects refugee families and low-income households.

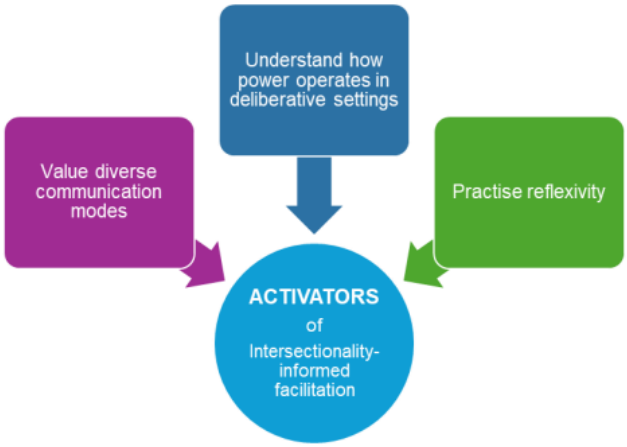
Transnational pilot: enclave deliberation

The EU-wide pilot reconceptualises transnational assemblies as 'enclave deliberations' applying the 'most-deeply affected' principle rather than pursuing demographic representation across 27 member states. It convenes 100 participants whose housing insecurity positions them at the intersection of multiple marginalisation axes, including migrants, LGBTQ+ individuals, people with disabilities, and those in precarious employment. This approach aims to create safe deliberative space for marginalised voices systematically absent from EU housing debates, with recommendations feeding into the European Commission's Affordable Housing Plan. The design tests whether prioritising deeply affected communities over broad demographic sampling can enhance democratic legitimacy and policy relevance.

Cross-cutting intervention: intersectionality-informed facilitation

All three pilots embed intersectionality through facilitation incorporating three 'activators': (1) valuing diverse communication modes beyond rational argument (e.g. storytelling, emotional expression); (2) understanding how power operates in deliberative settings and actively redistributing speaking opportunities; and (3) practising reflexivity through facilitators' examination of their own positionality and biases via debriefs and structured journaling. This intervention recognises facilitation as both a 'technology of power', which structures participation, and a 'technology of care', which fosters respect and mutual recognition (Fig. 3).

Figure 3: Activators of intersectionality-informed facilitation



Recommendations

Based on comprehensive analysis of existing practices and informed by the framework developed through the EU-CIEMBLY project, the following eight recommendations provide actionable guidance for integrating intersectionality into both citizen engagement initiatives and public policy development across the EU.

1 Develop accountability mechanisms in citizens' assemblies

Accountability mechanisms ensuring that assembly recommendations reach relevant policy-makers should be developed, and concrete follow-up processes should be established, in all citizens' assemblies organised at local, national or EU level. When codifying into law or mandating citizens' assemblies, intersectionality considerations should be embedded throughout the assemblies' design stages, with evaluation frameworks capturing whether the participation of persons belonging to the intersection of marginalised groups is enabled and whether their perspectives influence outcomes.

2 Improve citizens' assembly generalised practices

Assembly organisers and practitioners should adopt context-based analysis identifying which social group intersections face marginalisation regarding specific policy issues. They should also supplement standard sortition with targeted outreach, relationship-building with marginalised communities, and consideration of intersectionality-informed quotas. Co-design elements should be incorporated, thus enabling community representatives to shape agendas and rules. They should invest in facilitation training that explicitly address power dynamics and privilege multiple communication modes.

3 Establish EU standards for intersectional citizen engagement

EU-wide standards for inclusive citizen engagement that embed intersectionality principles across input, throughput, and output stages should be developed and adopted. Standards should specify minimum requirements for targeted outreach to marginalised communities, facilitator training on power dynamics, accommodation of diverse access needs, and evaluation methodologies that capture intersectional experiences.

4 Treat intersectionality as a continuous practice, not a recruitment checkbox

To design stransferable, effective and inclusive participatory democracy tools such as citizen assemblies, it is necessary to provide multilingual materials, logistical support (childcare, transport, digital training) and adaptive check-ins. Bringing in a diverse mix of participants is not something that can be ticked off upon finishing recruiting, it has to keep going through the whole assembly, to ensure that participants can fully engage.

5 Use iterative, dialogic approaches to consensus that surface minority voices and positions and avoid tokenism

To design citizens' assemblies that are both effective and genuinely inclusive of participants from diverse and often under-represented backgrounds, organisers should structure discussions across several iterative rounds, allowing for substantive exchange among participants. Such an approach ensures that those holding minority perspectives have meaningful opportunities to articulate their views, to have them seriously considered, and to influence the final outcome.

6 Design outputs and engagement strategies that amplify marginalised voices and challenge power imbalances

Include participant-authored elements (e.g., letters, forewords) alongside recommendations to convey overarching goals, lived experiences, and minority positions. When presenting the assembly's results, organisers should avoid reducing the outcome to a single, uniformly framed set of recommendations written in standard institutional language. The final outputs should instead incorporate contributions authored by participants themselves so that the perspectives of individuals who are commonly overlooked are conveyed directly into the policy-oriented document.

7 Revise the functioning of EU Citizens' Panels to embed intersectionality

EU Citizens' Panels should emphasise intersectional inclusion in addition to geographic representation quotas. Random selection should be supplemented by targeted recruitment through trusted CSOs to ensure meaningful participation of participants belonging to the intersection of marginalised groups. Panel outputs should be required to document minority positions and intersectional perspectives. An ongoing evaluation that tracks how different demographic and intersectional groups experience participation and influence should be established.

8 Support intersectional Civil Society Organisations

These organisations should also be recognised as essential democratic infrastructure and as societal resilience pillars, as well as expert knowledge holders on intersectional inequality. In addition, it would be crucial to ensure that these CSOs, and all CSOs working to foster citizens' participation in EU policy-making, receive sustained core funding rather than project-dependent resources, as well as meaningful roles in policy development processes, and capacity to hold institutions accountable.

FURTHER READING

O'Connor, N., Karatzia A., Warren R., Woodward S., Noles S., Jensen E. (2025), *Exploring Intersectionality in Citizens' Assembly Practices*, EU-CIEMBLY Deliverable 3.3.

Karatzia A., O'Connor, N., Woodward, S., Noles S., Barbera, C., Di Maso A., Mariani, L., Sicilia M. (2025), *Report on the EU-CIEMBLY Pilots' Design*, EU-CIEMBLY Deliverable 3.4.

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