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by

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on

**“The potential of citizens’ assemblies for parliaments: the experience of the
German Bundestag’s first citizens’ assembly”**

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The potential of citizens' assemblies for parliaments: the experience of the German Bundestag's first citizens' assembly

Dr Silke Albin, Deputy Secretary-General of the German Bundestag, ASGP,
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Colleagues,

“Innovation for parliaments” or “democratic renewal” is a topic we have been grappling with for years. Today, however, it is more topical than ever. In many countries, we are seeing attacks on democracy and parliamentarism from within and without, by authoritarian and populist forces. Something needs to be done to counter the loss of trust in our political systems and our parliaments in particular, and it needs to be done now.

The German Bundestag has decided to trial **citizens' assemblies** as a new tool. Our Secretary-General, Michael Schäfer, already reported that to you at the meeting in Luanda last autumn. Citizens' assemblies hold out the promise of added value for Members of Parliament and for the institution of Parliament as a whole, but also for society and for trust in the political system. **A few weeks ago, we completed the first citizens' assembly at the German Bundestag.** The topic was “nutrition in transition”, and more specifically the question of what role the state should play in healthy and sustainable nutrition.

I would like to report briefly today on our experience with this assembly. I hope what I have to say will awaken your interest, so we can discuss the subject at greater length at one of our next meetings.

Citizens' assemblies are a form of **deliberative democracy**. They are focused on dialogue and discussion, and the search for good compromises – not on pushing through demands and trying to extract as much as possible. In other words, they are both similar to and different from parliamentary debates: the participants in a citizens' assembly are not concerned with re-election, only with reaching an outcome which is as widely supported as possible on a single issue. That allows different discussions to take place.

How do citizens' assemblies work? The participants are drawn by lot from the entire population; in other words, they are **randomly selected**. As a result, it is not the “usual suspects” engaging in

discussion, but a cross section of the entire population. Depending on the topic, the participants meet over the course of several weekends. They **discuss** the question set by the plenary of the German Bundestag on the basis of facts, fairly, and on an equal footing, so that at the end of the process they can present **recommendations** to the Members of Parliament in a citizens' report. The aim is to reach recommendations supported by a large majority of the participants, which can then offer a good basis for political compromises in Parliament. To ensure this "deliberation" is successful, the participants receive **input** from scientists and practitioners from across the entire spectrum of scientific and political positions. At the same time, they are supported by a neutral **moderation team**, who ensure that the debates really do take place on an equal footing. A **scientific advisory board** supports the process, and a **scientific evaluation** is carried out to study the quality of the process.

Now, why should parliaments convene citizens' assemblies, given the degree of resemblance between their discussions and those held by Members of Parliament? Because citizens' assemblies offer real **added value for parliamentarism**. That said, of course they should not replace the work of parliaments. They are a **new and additional advisory tool**, one which supplies parliamentarians with different information than traditional commissions, public consultations or lobbying papers. They can – and should – inject momentum into parliamentary debates and processes. Naturally, Parliament alone retains the sole decision-making power. That must always be emphasised.

The added value for a parliament may differ depending on what question is asked. For example, a citizens' assembly can show Members of Parliament what position society takes on an issue if people seriously engage in discussion on its important aspects, and what potential compromises can command majority support among the population. A citizen's assembly is a kind of **seismograph**, one that is far more fine-tuned than, say, opinion polls. Alternatively, a citizens' assembly can show how the public would **prioritise** various aspects of the issue or potential solutions, and what **costs** people would be willing to accept. In any case, citizens' assemblies are always – in fact, I would say only – a good approach when the Members of Parliament **have a real question** and really want to hear the answer. That ensures there is genuine ownership of the process, genuine curiosity, and a real openness to the recommendations; it also means that it is highly likely that the recommendations will be examined further by Parliament and implemented. Even if that doesn't always happen immediately, and sometimes only much later.

What does all of this look like in practice? Let's take a look together at the **Citizens' Assembly on Nutrition in Transition: Between a Private Matter and Governmental Responsibilities**, which the German Bundestag held between September 2023 and February 2024, and which was a great success in terms of the substance, the outcomes, participant satisfaction and public interest. Let's examine the elements which worked particularly well.

Over the course of three weekends and six online sessions, the participants grappled with a very broad topic – and in the end agreed on **just nine recommendations**, but with a detailed explanation of their reasoning. This enables the Members of the Bundestag to understand why these specific recommendations were made. The question, which covered several individual aspects of the topic, was defined by the Members of Parliament in the German Bundestag's **decision establishing the Citizens' Assembly**. However, the participants were able to determine the focal points of their work, and thus set priorities in terms of the sub-topics. This approach was very successful, as the citizens' report indicates. Highly **agile process management** was the key to this.

The substantive quality of the assembly's work was ensured by a **scientific advisory board**, which was nominated by the parliamentary groups in the German Bundestag. This ensured that the members of the advisory board had relevant expertise and that the entire political spectrum was considered. The members of the advisory board went far beyond what was expected of them in terms of their engagement, another sign of a successful process. **Stakeholders** from within society were also involved in the process; they had the opportunity to comment on the plan and submit suggestions before the assembly started. We are currently considering the possibility of further expanding this involvement with regard to key aspects of the issue in future, to ensure that Parliament's citizens' assemblies are even better embedded in society as a whole. Another element of ensuring transparency and legitimacy in the eyes of society is for us to review our actions. An independent external team is conducting a **scientific evaluation** of the entire process and examining whether our self-defined goals were achieved and where there is potential for improvement. This self-critical attitude, with the aim of actually making use of opportunities to improve, has proven to be very effective.

Including **practical experiences** has also proved to be a useful complement to scientific information: the programme included excursions to a farm and a canteen, as well as a practical exercise in a supermarket. These **different approaches** to the topic are important because the citizens' assembly is not composed solely of university graduates; quite the opposite. It is essential that people who take a more emotional or

hands-on approach are able to participate as well. We intend to make even greater use of such innovative methods in future citizens' assemblies.

The diversity of the participants was thanks to the success of our **random selection**. The process was designed as a "civic lottery", under the auspices of the President of the German Bundestag.

20,000 people drawn by lot from across Germany were invited by the President to take part in the sortition of the assembly's members. They had the prospect of winning a place on the citizens' assembly and received a personal letter from the President of the Bundestag; the combination of these two factors led to an unusually high level of participation, with more than 11 per cent of those invited choosing to go forward with the process. Looking to the future, we are considering going even further and holding in-person doorstep conversations, with the aim of encouraging those who did not respond last time.

A major factor in the success of the process was the close involvement of the **President of the Bundestag** and a rapporteur group set up by the Council of Elders, consisting of the Parliamentary Secretaries of all the parliamentary groups, as well as the use of the parliamentary buildings for some of the meetings. The citizens participating in the assembly had the sense that they really were at the heart of decision-making, and they felt genuinely seen and valued by the President and the parliamentary groups. Another important factor was the willingness of **politicians specialising in this topic** from all of the parliamentary groups to engage in direct dialogue with the participants. This allowed the participants to see the parliamentarians' constraints and perspectives, while the politicians saw the seriousness of the work carried out by the citizens' assembly with their own eyes.

The President's engagement was undoubtedly one of the reasons why the Citizens' Assembly on Nutrition received extremely **broad media coverage**. There was an unusually high level of interest both in citizens' assemblies as a tool and their role for a parliament, and in the participants' experiences and the substantive outcomes. This is no doubt also linked to the situation I set out earlier, the fact that politics as a whole is currently under pressure. The **farmers' protests** in several European countries highlight this. The Citizens' Assembly on Nutrition represents an alternative model. A model based on understanding rather than anger, and which is focused on the common good, not individual interests. Citizens' assemblies build support for parliamentary democracy, rather than making society more polarised. For our parliaments, it is a far more attractive prospect to engage in intensive discussions with the public in this way than against a backdrop of burning barricades. I would be delighted if we could

discuss the opportunities and challenges that citizens' assemblies offer our parliaments in greater depth at one of our next meetings.