Project memo

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ACT45: Evaluate to what degree a “citizens assembly” could be a useful tool for the two specific emission domains: transport and zero construction sites

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Summary

This report assesses the extent to which citizens’ assemblies can serve as an effective governance tool for addressing emissions in two complex municipal domains: transport and zero-emission construction sites. Drawing on the 2025 Trondheim Waste-to-Energy CCS citizen assembly as a reference case, the analysis shows that deliberative, representative participation can strengthen legitimacy, improve public understanding of technical climate measures, and generate socially grounded recommendations in areas marked by uncertainty, trade-offs, and contested interests.

In the transport emissions domain, citizens’ assemblies appear particularly well suited to informing policy choices where public acceptance, behavioural change, and distributional impacts are central. Assemblies can help municipalities navigate trade-offs between emissions reduction, accessibility, and equity, and can enhance legitimacy for measures such as road-space reallocation, pricing schemes, or modal shifts. Its usefulness is highest for medium-scale, locally grounded interventions, while effectiveness depends on alignment with regional and national transport governance structures.

For zero-emission construction sites, the potential of citizens’ assemblies is more context-dependent. While the domain is technically specialized and less visible to the public, assemblies can add value in large projects or district-level developments by articulating community expectations, legitimizing stricter standards, and balancing public and industry interests.

Overall, the report concludes that citizens’ assemblies are a valuable complementary tool, most effective when carefully designed, well integrated into decision-making processes, and used where legitimacy and social acceptance are key constraints on climate action.

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1 Introduction

Citizens' assemblies are a democratic innovation increasingly used by cities and municipalities to address complex issues related to the sustainable transition. They bring together a diverse, representative group of residents to learn about a topic, hear from experts, and deliberate collectively. This process allows communities to consider long-term environmental, social, and economic impacts beyond short electoral cycles. Because participants are given time, information, and facilitation, citizen assemblies tend to produce informed and balanced recommendations on issues such as climate action, mobility, energy use, and urban planning. Municipal governments can then use these recommendations to guide policy, strengthening both the legitimacy and inclusiveness of sustainability decisions.

Trondheim's 2025 Citizens' Assembly on Waste-to-Energy carbon capture and storage (WtE-CCS) provides a useful case for reflecting on when and how deliberative, representative, participatory processes can complement existing governance and planning mechanisms. A citizens' assembly can help in domains where trade-offs are complex, contested, and not amenable to purely technocratic or stakeholder-driven solutions. Transport and construction (especially construction sites aiming for zero emissions) are precisely such arenas: multiple actors (government levels, private sector, users, residents) have different incentives, and long lead times, uncertain costs, infrastructure lock-in, behavioural change, and equity concerns all play roles.

Below, we summarise the assembly in Trondheim and assess the potential and the caveats of applying a citizens' assembly approach to (1) the transport emission domain and (2) zero-emission (or very low-emission) construction sites, with reference to lessons from the WtE-CCS assembly and deliberative governance.

2 Summary and lessons from the Trondheim WtE-CCS Citizens' Assembly

Trondheim has set ambitious climate goals for 2030, and its waste-to-energy (WtE) incinerator at Tiller is one of the city's largest sources of CO_2 emissions. In 2025, the city convened a citizens' assembly of 19 residents – selected by stratified random sampling - to deliberate how to implement carbon capture and storage (CCS) at the WtE plant in a sustainable, fair way. Participants received expert presentations and engaged in facilitated discussions before co-creating policy recommendations for the City Council.

Process and Key Recommendations

The assembly heard from scientists as well as pro- and anti-CCS groups to ensure a balanced view. Guided by neutral facilitators, members examined all facets of the CCS project. In June 2025, they delivered 15 recommendations to the City Council (Byrådet). Consensus was strong: all but one recommendation earned at least 75% support, and six were unanimous. The recommendations spanned six themes (Table 2) from cost-sharing to risk management.

Table 2: Themes of the Trondheim WtE-CCS Citizens' Assembly Recommendations

Theme	Focus of Recommendations
Economy & Cost Sharing	Share CCS costs fairly among government, industry, and citizens ("polluter pays" by waste generated), with safeguards for low-income groups.
Democracy & Process	Ensure a transparent process with clear public information, thorough analyses (logistics, carbon footprint, risk), and early, meaningful resident involvement.
Responsibility & Ethics	Local leaders should secure national responsibility and multi-level commitment for effective CCS deployment.
Risk Management	Assess health and ecological risks thoroughly, take mitigation measures, and communicate safety findings clearly to the public.
Local Impact	Minimize local disruption: plan needed infrastructure upgrades (e.g. roads) and use zero-emission transport; involve or compensate affected neighbours.
Waste & Consumption	Continue sound waste reduction, reuse, and recycling efforts even after CCS is in place, aligning climate action with circular economy goals.

The assembly members emphasised that CCS must not come at the expense of social equity or other climate efforts. City officials praised the panel's work and pledged to factor these citizen recommendations into upcoming decisions on CCS.

Lessons Learned

- The Trondheim assembly experience shows that ordinary citizens, given sound information and support, can grapple with complex technical issues like CCS and even produce consensus solutions.

- Broad public involvement strengthened democratic legitimacy. The panel's relatively diverse makeup meant community values were represented in climate decisions. The members took their role seriously and felt empowered; many said they would participate again.

- The assembly highlighted the importance of skilled facilitation. The program was adjusted to help participants grasp technical content quickly, though some wanted more time to refine their proposals. Strong facilitation kept participants engaged.

- The city gained a template for integrating citizens' assemblies into its governance – a potentially lasting benefit beyond the WtE-CCS case.

Degree of usefulness

The citizens' assembly on WtE-CCS in Trondheim proved highly useful. It strengthened legitimacy and transparency in a technically complex, potentially controversial project. By recruiting a representative group of citizens through stratified random selection, the municipality ensured that diverse perspectives were included in deliberations. This inclusiveness gave a clear sense of how ordinary people viewed CCS implementation.

The structured learning process, expert briefings, balanced arguments, and facilitated dialogue enabled informed participation rather than symbolic consultation. City officials emphasised that the assembly "brought more voices into democracy," thus increasing both the legitimacy of the forthcoming CCS decision and public trust in local governance. In this way, the assembly served as a procedural bridge between expert-driven climate policy and the lived concerns of citizens, mitigating scepticism about technological solutions by embedding them in transparent, participatory decision-making.

Substantively, the assembly also delivered tangible policy value for Trondheim's CCS strategy. The 19 participants produced 15 detailed recommendations. These outputs were not vague expressions of opinion but actionable proposals with direct implications for policy design, such as adopting a fair "polluter pays" funding model and ensuring that CCS does not undermine recycling targets. Their collective stance provided decision-makers with a socially informed mandate to move forward with CCS, conditional on equity and transparency.

The City Government's (Byrådet) commitment to integrating the recommendations into future decisions demonstrates its practical relevance. Beyond the immediate case, the process built institutional learning: officials now view citizens' assemblies as a viable governance tool for complex climate policies. Thus, the Trondheim WtE-CCS assembly's usefulness lies in its dual achievement - legitimising difficult policy choices while producing informed, implementable insights that enrich both democratic practice and environmental governance.

3 Transport emissions: opportunities and challenges for a citizens' assembly

Transport is a major source of urban greenhouse gas emissions, and reducing these requires complex decisions that balance efficiency, equity, accessibility, and local context. Traditional planning often struggles to capture citizens' diverse perspectives or build legitimacy for transformative measures like congestion pricing or reallocating road space. This section examines the potential benefits and limitations of using citizens' assemblies to inform transport emission policies and support more democratic, locally grounded mobility transitions.

Strengths / potential benefits:

- *Complexity and trade-offs*
  Transport planning involves many trade-offs: e.g. costs vs accessibility, local impacts (noise, congestion) vs emissions, equity across neighbourhoods, modal shifts, and timing/financing. A citizens' assembly can help weigh these trade-offs from a "lay perspective," ensuring that local values, lived experiences, and distributional concerns are surfaced.

- *Public legitimacy & buy-in*
  Major transport changes (e.g., restricting car access, congestion pricing, reallocating road space to bikes/buses) often evoke public resistance. If people feel they have a real voice via a representative deliberation, legitimacy and trust may increase, reducing conflict and increasing acceptance.

- *Bridging knowledge gaps*
  Citizens may start with limited technical knowledge. Through structured expert briefings, they can learn about emissions, cost, behavioural responses, and alternatives (e.g. e-mobility, public transit expansion) and collectively deliberate to coalesce on balanced recommendations.

- *Local specificity*
  Transport challenges differ strongly by area (dense vs sparse, hilly vs flat, existing infrastructure). A city or district-level citizens' assembly can tailor recommendations to the local context in ways that more generic planning cannot.

Constraints:

- *Scale and fragmentation*
  Transport systems are regional, often crossing municipal boundaries, and involve national or even supra-municipal infrastructure financing and regulation (roads, rail, tolling). A citizens' assembly limited to one municipality may lack authority over key levers (e.g. road tolling, highway expansion).

- *Technical load and complexity*
  Some transport technicalities (traffic modelling, system optimisation, cost-benefit analysis under uncertainty) are complex. A citizens' assembly must be well supported by domain experts, neutral facilitators, and carefully curated inputs to avoid "expert capture" or overwhelming participants.

- *Time and resource intensity*
  To deliberate meaningfully, assembly members need time, materials, and an opportunity for reflection. If the schedule is too compressed, recommendations may be shallow or driven by heuristics rather than deep reasoning.

Degree of usefulness

A citizens' assembly could be quite useful, especially for medium-scale transport interventions (e.g., redesign of city streets, public transit expansion, parking policies, traffic calming, bike/pedestrian network enhancements) rather than extremely large infrastructure projects (regional highways, new high-speed rail) unless structured in a multi-jurisdictional or tiered way.

Its greatest value may lie in supporting prioritisation and trade-off decisions rather than guiding detailed engineering choices. For instance, it can help municipalities determine whether to reallocate road space to buses, bicycles, parking, or completely car-free zones, and to assess which pricing schemes would be most fair and socially acceptable, rather than focusing on technical questions such as the selection of a specific traffic signal timing algorithm.

The effectiveness will depend heavily on the municipal government's commitment to integrate (or at least publicly respond to) the assembly's recommendations, and on the legal and institutional alignment among the transport bodies involved.

In Trondheim (or other pilot cities), a citizens' assembly for transport could be a valuable complement to expert planning and public consultation, particularly where citizen acceptance and legitimacy are bottlenecks.

4 Zero-emission construction sites (or ultra-low emission construction)

"Zero-emission construction sites" here refers to construction operations (materials delivery, on-site machinery, energy use, site logistics) that aim to minimise or eliminate greenhouse gas emissions or pollutant emissions. This is a more technical, sector-specific domain than transport, but still with public and governance interfaces (permit processes, neighbourhood impacts, trade-offs in cost, timing, regulation).

Why a citizens' assembly might be relevant:

- *Local/community externalities*
  Construction sites affect neighbours via noise, dust, traffic, safety, vibrations, visual impact, and road closures. Citizens' assemblies can articulate acceptable trade-offs between emissions and disruptions, and how mitigation should be prioritised.
- *Setting social expectations and norms*
  As zero-emission construction is relatively novel, public acceptance may lag. A deliberative process can help communities understand what is feasible, what extra cost might be justified, and where they are willing to allow certain compromises.
- *Balancing developer, public, and regulatory interests*
  Decisions about which technologies to require (e.g. electric machinery, hydrogen, biofuels, off-site fabrication, modular building) involve cost risk, regulatory change, incentives, subsidies, and long-term benefits. Citizens' assemblies can help mediate between public interest and industry constraints.
- *Long-term vision vs incremental regulation*
  Construction and urban development often have inertia. A citizens' assembly may help set a vision or roadmap for zero-emission construction over decades, thereby anchoring subsequent regulatory or incentive instruments.

Challenges and limitations:

- *Highly technical and specialised domain*
  Much of what happens on construction sites (machinery emissions, emissions embodied in materials, construction logistics) is specialised knowledge. Translating that into digestible input for lay participants is possible but demanding.
- *Narrow scope and limited public visibility*
  Unlike transport policy, construction site emissions are more hidden from the public. Many citizens may feel the issues are too remote to engage deeply, which may depress motivation or quality of deliberation.
- *Authority, incentives, and enforcement*
  Regulatory decisions regarding construction emissions are often governed by national or regional building codes, environmental regulations, and building permit authorities. A local citizens' assembly may lack direct influence unless authorities commit to adopting or responding to its recommendations.

- *Scale and diversity of projects*
  Construction projects vary enormously in size, type (residential, commercial, infrastructure), and context. A one-size-fits-all assembly might struggle to produce recommendations that are meaningful across that diversity.
- *Risk of capture or bias*
  Because the pool of experts and industry stakeholders is relatively narrow, there is a risk that the assembly's framing or expert inputs may be biased. Care must be taken in expert selection, balance of perspectives (industry, environmental, technical, labour), and transparency.

Degree of usefulness

A citizens' assembly could be moderately useful, especially when focused on local district-scale development or large municipal projects (e.g., a new housing development, major extension) where the public is directly affected, and decisions are still flexible (choice of technologies, phasing, mitigation).

Its usefulness is perhaps lower for the *day-to-day* technical decisions on small construction sites, unless aggregated across many sites or built into a governance framework (e.g., municipalities running regular "construction emissions panels" as part of permit review).

In many cases, the primary value would be normative and legitimacy-enhancing: helping the public understand trade-offs, building social license for stricter regulations, and anchoring community acceptance.

Effectiveness will depend heavily on the institutional design: expert inputs, the extent to which the recommendations are binding or consulted, integration with permit and regulatory regimes, and resources for implementation.

5 Cross-domain comparison and design recommendations

Below, we present a summary comparison and a set of design recommendations for implementing citizens' assemblies in these two emission domains, drawing from the Trondheim CCS experience and deliberative governance best practices.

Table 1. Compares the potential usefulness of citizens' assemblies in the transport and construction emissions domains.

Factor	Transport domain	Construction emissions domain
Public visibility	High - people experience transport daily	Lower - emissions less visible, impacts more indirect
Scale / jurisdiction complexity	Multi-jurisdiction often involved	Often localized or tied to building projects; regulatory oversight by municipalities
Complexity of technical inputs	High (traffic modelling, economics)	High (emissions modelling, materials science), but often more specialized
Potential for participation & legitimacy gains	Strong, especially for major transport shifts	Moderate, stronger in areas with active community interest (dense urban districts)
Leverage of assembly recommendations	Good potential if government links to planning	Risk lower unless tied to permit or regulatory pathways
Risk of capture or bias	Moderate	Somewhat higher, due to narrower technical community

In summary, a citizens' assembly holds significant promise as a complementary governance tool for both transport and construction emission domains, but its utility is context-dependent.

- In the transport domain, the method is likely to be highly useful for shaping policies where citizen acceptance, behavioural change, and distribution of benefits and burdens are core. Its success depends heavily on ensuring that the assembly is properly integrated into planning and decision paths and that the authorities commit to giving it weight.
- In the zero-emission construction domain, the usefulness is more nuanced. For large projects and district planning, a citizens' assembly can help align community expectations with technical ambitions and bolster the legitimacy of stricter standards. But for everyday construction site decisions, its use is more marginal unless embedded in a broader institutional framework.

The Trondheim WtE-CCS Citizens' Assembly shows that a well-run deliberative process can yield high levels of consensus and actionable recommendations in a technically complex domain, provided it is well designed, resourced, and connected to decision-making. The same design principles, adapted to the specifics of transport and construction, would underpin success in those domains as well.

6 Conclusions

This report demonstrates that citizens' assemblies can be a valuable complementary governance tool for addressing complex, contested emission domains at the municipal level. Drawing on lessons from the Trondheim WtE-CCS Citizens' Assembly, the analysis shows that well-designed deliberative processes can enhance legitimacy, improve public understanding of technically complex issues, and generate socially grounded, actionable recommendations.

In the transport domain, citizens' assemblies appear particularly well suited to supporting decisions in which trade-offs among emissions reduction, accessibility, equity, and everyday lived experience are central, and where public acceptance is often a limiting factor. In the zero-emission construction domain, their usefulness is more context-dependent but still meaningful, especially for large projects or district-level developments where local impacts, community expectations, and long-term standards are at stake. Across both domains, the effectiveness of citizens' assemblies centres on careful design, balanced expert input, skilled facilitation, and critically, a clear commitment from authorities to engage seriously with the outcomes.

Future work and research should focus on which cases municipalities can use citizens' assemblies, but more importantly, on how such processes can be institutionalised as a stable part of local governance. This includes exploring how assemblies can be systematically linked to planning cycles, regulatory processes, and political decision-making, rather than remaining ad hoc or symbolic exercises. Key areas for further investigation include defining clear mandates and follow-up obligations, developing repeatable models for assembly design across policy domains, and building administrative capacity and institutional memory within municipalities. By embedding citizens' assemblies into existing governance frameworks, while preserving their deliberative integrity, municipalities can strengthen legitimacy, improve policy, and better navigate the complex societal transitions required for emissions reductions.

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Appendix

Main recommendations – Trondheim Citizen Assembly (2025, In Norwegian):

Anbefalingene fra folkepanelet

Medlemmene samlet seg om 15 anbefalinger fordelt på seks tema. Alle anbefalingene ble stemt over, og prosentvis oppslutning er synliggjort. I anbefalingene brukes forkortelsen *"prosjektet"* om realisering av CO2-fangst på forbrenningsanlegget for restavfall på Tiller.

Tema: Økonomi og kostnadsfordeling

Anbefaling 1

Folkepanelet anbefaler at Norges totale kostnader for CCS fordeles rettferdig mellom staten, kommunene, næringslivet og innbyggerne etter prinsippet; høyt klimafotavtrykk gir høy betaling. I det legger vi at alle betaler basert på mengden avfall de produserer; både direkte og indirekte.

Anbefaling 2

Folkepanelet anbefaler: prosjektet må ikke forsterke sosiale og økonomiske ulikheter. Når kostnadene skal fordeles må det tas særlig hensyn til lavinntektsgrupper.

Anbefaling 3

Folkepanelet anbefaler at Trondheim kommune og prosjekteier synliggjør hvilke positive og negative ringvirkninger prosjektet vil kunne gi.

Anbefaling 4

Folkepanelet anbefaler: Det forventes å sikre grundige økonomiske beregninger og god planlegging for å unngå budsjettsprekk. En eventuell budsjettsprekk må stå for utbygger sin regning.

Tema - Demokrati og beslutningsgrunnlag

Anbefaling 5

Folkepanelet anbefaler: Trondheim kommune må sikre en transparent prosess der alle får tilgang på presis og relevant informasjon om prosjektet og om andre kommunale klimatiltak. Denne informasjonen må formidles i et klart språk.

Anbefaling 6

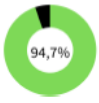
Folkepanelet anbefaler: Prosjektet må være basert på et bredt beslutningsgrunnlag og grundige analyser som inkluderer logistikk, klimafotavtrykk og risiko- og sårbarhetsanalyser.

Anbefaling 7

Folkepanelet anbefaler at Trondheim kommune, og andre relevante aktører, sikrer en bred, tidlig og meningsfull innbyggerinvolvering både i Trondheim og andre kommuner som blir berørt av prosjektet.

Tema - Ansvar og etikk

Anbefaling 8



Folkepanelet anbefaler at lokalt lederskap sørger for at ansvaret for en helhetlig og effektiv implementering av CCS blir nasjonalt, og at det forankres på lokalt, nasjonalt og globalt nivå.

Tema - Risiko

Anbefaling 9

Folkepanelet anbefaler: Risiko knyttet til helse, økologi og naturinngrep må tas alvorlig gjennom grundige vurderinger og avlastende tiltak.

Anbefaling 10

Folkepanelet anbefaler: Det er spesielt viktig at informasjon knyttet til prosjektets risiko kommuniseres tydelig til innbyggerne. Informasjonen må inneholde hvilke vurderinger som er gjort, detaljer om hva som har kommet frem i vurderingene og hvilke konkrete tiltak som iverksettes for å redusere eventuell risiko.

Tema - Lokal påvirkning

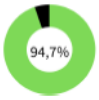
Anbefaling 11

Folkepanelet anbefaler at Trondheim kommune og involverte aktører utarbeider en detaljert plan for logistikk og infrastruktur, både for anlegget og for nærområdet. Planen må også inkludere utbedring av veg der det er relevant.

Anbefaling 12

Folkepanelet anbefaler at transportløsningene som velges må sikre kontroll over hele transportlinjen, og at en transportkjede uten utslipp er en forutsetning.

Anbefaling 13



Folkepanelet anbefaler: Trondheim kommune og andre involverte aktører må ta særlig hensyn til lokalbefolkningen og sikre sterk medvirkning fra de som blir mest berørt, for eksempel av støy og rystelser.

Tema - Avfall og forbruk

Anbefaling 14

Folkepanelet anbefaler: Vi forutsetter at Trondheim kommune fortsetter med å utvikle gode og treffsikre insentivordninger for gjenbruk, avfallsreduksjon og sortering selv om et CCS-anlegg blir realisert.

Anbefaling 15

Folkepanelet anbefaler: For å minimere transportbehov må geografisk nærhet mellom forbrenningsanlegget, CCS-anlegget og SESAM prioriteres.