

## Article

# Do Mini-Publics Answer Environmental Demands by Youth? Promises and Perceptions of ‘Voice’ in Four European Cities

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## Abstract

This study examines how climate citizens’ assemblies (CCAs) influence youth engagement, both in practice and in shaping perceptions of political “voice”, drawing on Albert O. Hirschman’s “Exit, Voice, and Loyalty” framework. Through qualitative analysis of 71 interviews, participatory workshops, and observational data across four cities—Barcelona, Bologna, Geneva, and Paris—it explores whether CCAs address youth climate activists’ demands, enable meaningful participation, and yield policy outcomes aligned with their claims. Findings reveal divergent perceptions: in Bologna, co-design with activists tended to foster trust, while Barcelona saw disillusionment due to unmet expectations. Geneva’s embedded deliberative processes strengthened institutional loyalty, whereas Paris faced skepticism as activists turned to civil disobedience. Overall, CCAs’ effectiveness hinges on inclusivity, follow-through, and communication; when perceived as tokenistic, they risk reinforcing disengagement (“exit”). The study underscores the need for embedded, responsive democratic innovations to sustain youth participation amid climate crises.



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## 1. Introduction

The pattern of political participation of young people reflects the tensions that contemporary democracies experience: the youth are those who abstain the most from participating in elections, have the least confidence in political parties, and are also those who mobilize the most in the streets [1]. This has been seen with special intensity in social movements that demand urgent measures to stop global warming. Since the 2019 climate strikes, and with renewed, albeit limited, momentum following the pandemic lockdowns, the surge in youth-led environmental mobilizations worldwide has been exceptional in size and duration, attracting not only young people but also children, who have become active participants in the movement. Along with other transnational movements such as *Extinction Rebellion*, in which many young people engage, it has mobilized millions globally and given greater centrality to the climate crisis in political and media discourse.

In this scenario, cities have emerged as central spaces to find solutions to citizens’ demands in pluralistic societies and have been amongst the most proactive and productive in establishing institutions of participation [2–4]. One of the most prominent institutional answers to young activists’ environmental claims has been the promotion of climate

citizens' assemblies (CCAs). Thus, how institutional responsiveness to these claims is perceived and evaluated is key, because it can be expected that it will shape further political (dis)engagement, which is crucial for democracy's legitimacy and its ability to adapt to societal pressures arising from the climate emergency.

Democratic systems work around free, competitive, and fair elections that organize access to political power. The normative foundation of this system refers to the intrinsic value of equality between human beings as well as to a performative expectation. That is, it is expected that if a democracy represents and articulates plural interests it will be governed for the benefit of the majority [5]). In this scheme, some deliberation theorists grant epistemic superiority to consensual and deliberate decision-making [6]. Following this reasoning, political inequality—actual or perceived—would be one of the main sources of both the disenchantment produced by democracy and its poor performance. Many scholars and activists perceive mini-publics or citizens' assemblies as institutions able to perform this high quality of democratic deliberation [7].

Considering that the link between public demands (here, by young activists) and institutional answers (by representative institutions) is crucial to reinforcing, sustaining, and/or eroding democracy, this could open an opportunity for democratic renewal. This paper addresses the following overarching question: In what ways have CCAs contributed to youth engagement, both in practice and in shaping their perceptions of this possibility of 'voice'? It thereby seeks to analyze how and to what extent CCAs, particularly those established at the local level, have provided an answer to the claims of youth-led movements. What we seek to explore is whether assemblies have succeeded in (1) addressing the concerns and demands raised by young people regarding climate change, (2) offering a space for young people to participate meaningfully in the decision-making process around climate action, and/or (3) proposing concrete policies that align with the demands by young activists.

Building on Albert O. Hirschman's work on *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970), we suggest that protest may influence 'voice' by opening a window of opportunity to adapt and possibly improve democratic institutions. Hirschman explores the strategies members of an organization (whether a business, a nation, a party, or any other form of human organization) could develop when they are confronted with the deterioration of the goods or services provided by the organization. While 'loyalty' is identified with no action (accept things are as they are), 'exit' means withdrawing from the relationship; and 'voice' is an attempt to act to repair or improve the organization. Applied to the relationship between citizens and states, exit was originally identified with an individual solution, e.g., migration; while voice was identified with a collective solution, e.g., protest. In our study, we are revisiting this framework to analyze the interaction between voice, loyalty, and exit when studying youth environmental movements. From our empirical study, we find that the 'voice' expressed by young people and activists through their movements, has opened up other avenues for more 'voice', this time within democratic spaces, through the institution of mini-publics. While these premises of new forms of participation and deliberation hold a promise of greater engagement, if the answers therein provided by institutions are not seen as satisfactory, there is the risk of 'exit' (redefined here as a rejection of the overall framework for participation), which can take different forms.

This paper builds on a two-year project conducted from 2021 to 2023 that mapped the multiple forms of engagement of young people in cities from four countries—Barcelona in Spain, Bologna in Italy, Paris in France, and Geneva in Switzerland—from protest to engagement with institutions. The project explored, on the one hand, the conditions and mechanisms driving the political participation of mobilized youth and, on the other hand, the institutional contexts that have allowed successful democratic innovations to

happen. Here, we present findings of the second dimension. This research was guided by two questions: How have different contexts of engagement influenced the setup and design of CCAs? How have CCAs influenced activists' perceptions of the overall dynamic of participation? The data collection is based on qualitative methodology. The context of origin, design, results, and evaluations of the citizen assemblies drawn are analyzed based on the review of secondary sources, analysis of official documents, and interviews with activists, experts, and officials from the four cities. The paper starts by setting out the state of the art (Section 1) and the research design (Section 2). It then analyses the context of engagement around CCAs in the four cities (Section 3) before discussing the outcomes of CCAs and activists' perceptions of the overall dynamic of participation (Section 4).

## 2. State of the Art

### 2.1. Young Voices in Climate Movements and Mini-Publics

Since 2018 the youth-led climate movement, in particular *Fridays for Future* and *Extinction Rebellion*, has managed to mobilize thousands of participants around the world to demand immediate action against climate change. This 'climate momentum'—until the pandemic, which strongly affected the movement<sup>1</sup>—has had an impact on public opinion, the media, and political agendas as shown, for example, by the increase in pro-environmental attitudes in Europe. The challenge made by this reaction has at least two dimensions, the first of which refers to democracy and responsiveness at times of democratic fatigue and disenchantment. The other dimension refers to the concrete solutions provided to the claims put forward by young climate activists. Measures to limit carbon emissions and the promotion of climate citizens' assemblies have been two prominent answers (see [www.knoca.eu](http://www.knoca.eu)). Both are connected by the expectancy of introducing democratic innovations better able to provide solutions to both the legitimacy deficit and the outputs in terms of public policies addressed to prevent climate change.

Accordingly, there is increasing support for and commissioning of climate assemblies by social movements and civil society organizations [8]. Why are CCAs playing a more prominent role than other participatory tools in the public debate and in the demands of youth activists? Reasons include the hopes posited on an institutional design to overcome some of the shortcomings of representative systems and their potential to introduce transformative policies [9], as well as on the same value attributed to the novelty and the role of experts in disseminating it globally, as happened decades ago with participatory budgeting. There is an expectation that climate assemblies could provide a means for ratcheting up pressure for action on political institutions [10] or to bridge the gap between ordinary citizens and political elites, fostering mutual influence and deliberation across various levels of governance [11]. However, while many view CCAs as powerful institutions with the potential to significantly influence climate politics and policy—particularly in areas where representative institutions have fallen short [8]—others see them as a mechanism to bypass unruly civil society and engage more compliant 'ordinary' citizens.

Proponents are optimistic about the transformative potential of CCAs, while critics fear they may be used predominantly as a tool for public authorities to legitimize their actions and control public debate (for an overview of different positions see [10]). Additionally, mini-publics such as CCAs face inherent pitfalls, including a potential lack of legitimacy, limited inclusiveness, and the risk of their recommendations being ignored by policymakers. These challenges are often linked to their lack of embeddedness—how well these deliberative processes are integrated into existing institutional frameworks. Deliberative innovations that are embedded are more likely to ensure smoother implementation and increase the likelihood that their outcomes will be taken seriously by decision-makers. However, without such integration, their democratic potential may remain unrealized [12,13].

Regarding the views of social movements, Felicetti shows that they have different attitudes and expectations regarding democratic innovations and that these are conditioned by the contexts [14]. Thus, while in many cases, the movements demand that climate assemblies be launched, in others or in sectors of the same movement, distrust is expressed. This distrust is based on the perception that a drawn assembly displaces the movements' demands, to which is added criticism of results that are perceived as insufficient. In their study of the climate change movement and citizen assemblies, Knops and Vrydagh emphasize the inconsistencies between the expectations and potential of these participatory institutions, due to their limited territorial scope and dimension of the policies that can be designed [15]. While the claim is for radical transformation on a global scale, the mechanism has capabilities embedded in a certain institutional structure and at limited territorial levels. Considering the previous, the study of movement's expectations and assessments will be shaped in a given context.

In brief, the dimensions and intensity of the protests against climate change have converged with the agenda of democratic innovations: this has given rise to the deployment of participation mechanisms aimed at capturing and responding to the demands of young people. Thus, there is an abstract confluence between youth activists' claims and the ideals of deliberative democracy but there is not enough empirical evidence on the articulation between movements and mini-publics. We understand that the state's responses and the way in which they are perceived are central to strengthening or further eroding engagement in democracy. Rethinking the work of Albert Hirschman, we ask ourselves how participation mechanisms<sup>2</sup>, such as the CCAs, have worked and how young people perceive them, assuming that these perceptions can mark subsequent political trajectories: exit, voice, and loyalty.

## 2.2. Multiple Interplays Between Exit and Voice

With a focus on the institutional responses to the decline in the quality of products, services, or policies offered by companies, organizations, and states Albert O. Hirschman developed the arguments of *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (1970). This conceptual framework categorizes three strategies of consumers, members of organizations, and citizens when they perceive the decline in the quality of responses from institutions or organizations. Exit is simply the act of leaving because it is believed that another firm or institution will provide better goods, services, or benefits. Voice is the act of complaining or organizing a complaint or protest to directly achieve a recovery of the quality that has been damaged. Loyalty is accepting the loss of quality out of trust without generating any action.

In the field of politics, Hirschman associated voice with social protest, while exit was understood mainly as migration. Hirschman [16–18] accounts for different forms that include domestic migrations (from the countryside to the city or other cities) and external migrations (to other countries). In his first elaborations, Hirschman observed that exit weakened voice, but later he found that the interactions could be more dynamic, as shown by the German case before and after the fall of the Berlin Wall [18].

Subsequent scholarship has continued to explore the interactions between exit, voice, and loyalty. While economics often emphasizes exit and political theory highlights voice, these actions may coexist. For instance, workers may first express concerns (voice) before ultimately deciding to leave (exit), aligning with Hirschman's original proposition that these strategies are not mutually exclusive [19]. Loyalty plays a complex role and may influence the balance between exit and voice. It can take various forms, ranging from unconscious or passive acceptance to reformist engagement, and can also be expressed either actively or passively, loudly or quietly [20].

Here, we further explore the interplays between exit and voice among climate activists. Their disengagement from formal democracy (through electoral abstention or rejection of the role of state institutions) is analyzed as exit and their campaigns or protest movements as a form of voice. As a further element added to the exit, voice, and loyalty framework, we propose to explore the perceptions of an institutional response (here CCAs) to voice (youth mobilizations) and how these relate to their loyalty to existing democratic spaces. It is in this dynamic and nuanced way that we seek to analyze the results of the confluence between climate protests and democratic innovations: we propose as an exploratory hypothesis that voice (in this case, protests) offers an opportunity to the political system to respond (symbolically and materially). Thus, how young people evaluate the consequences of their mobilization and the perceived responses could lead, when the assessment is positive, to situations of loyalty towards democracy and its institutions [14]. On the contrary, when the perception is negative, the voice can end up encouraging the exit, understood here as demobilization and passive rejection of the system or, alternatively, adherence to anti-system projects and actions. In short, we understand that institutional responses and the way in which they are perceived contribute to strengthening or further eroding trust in democracy and its institutions.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1. Participants

The research presented here is based on two years of fieldwork (2022–2023) in Barcelona, Bologna, Geneva and Paris. The choice of these cities as case studies was guided by their active engagement with youth-led climate movements and their distinct yet comparable approaches to climate governance which have different patterns of civic engagement (e.g., the system of direct democracy in Geneva, the predominant role of social movements in Bologna, the new wave of participatory institutions in Barcelona, and the tradition of contentious politics in Paris). Each city had hosted significant climate activism events or initiatives and demonstrated varying levels of experimentation with climate citizens' assemblies (CCAs), offering a diverse yet coherent basis for analysis. These cities also provided access to both local youth movements and city administrations, allowing for an in-depth exploration of the dynamics between activists and policymakers in different political contexts. Across the four case studies, we asked: In what ways have CCAs contributed to youth engagement, both in practice and in the activists' perceptions? To what extent did CCAs meet the expectations of youth climate movements (1)? Did activists feel they were influential in the setup and design of the assembly (2)? Did CCAs empower these movements by making them feel heard and listened to by institutions (3)? The interviews were complemented by workshops with key informants in Bologna and Barcelona and participatory observation in Paris and including a workshop taking place on 2 October 2023 in Geneva, in which representatives of and activists from all four cities partook for an exchange of views.

Over this period, 71 semi-structured interviews were conducted with young climate activists and representatives of municipal administrations to understand how they perceived each other and adapted their strategies and responses. Of these, 48 interviews were conducted with activists and 23 with public officials. The distribution of interviews across the four cities was as follows: 16 in Barcelona (10 activists and 6 with officials from the local and autonomous community administration), 20 in Bologna (14 activists and 6 municipal officials) in Bologna, 14 in Geneva (10 with activists and 4 with municipal and cantonal officials), and 21 in Paris (14 with activists and 7 with municipal officials).

We chose to focus on two movements, *Fridays for Future* (and corollary movements that emerged at a similar time and had similar modes of functioning such as *Youth for*

*Climate*) and *Extinction Rebellion*. Both were transnational in nature and thus offered opportunities for comparability, and, while only *Fridays for Future* is explicitly youth-led, our fieldwork quickly showed porous boundaries between the two, with many young activists either pertaining to both or joining *Extinction Rebellion* after a few years with *Fridays for Future*. It allowed us to take a broader view of what “young voices” may represent, past the assumption young activists necessarily foreground their youth and make primarily intergenerational claims [21]. While a primary focus of the fieldwork was on activists belonging to movements that foreground their youth, such as *Fridays for Future* or *Youth for Climate*, the research was, then, extended to other movements, such as *Extinction Rebellion*, in which many young people who once engaged with *Fridays for Future* now participate in. The gender distribution of activists interviewed was balanced, with an average age of 21 years. Municipal officials interviewed held roles in departments related to climate policy, citizen participation, and youth engagement.

To complement the interviews, three participatory workshops were conducted. In Bologna, a workshop gathered 12 participants, including both local activists and academics. In Barcelona, a similar workshop engaged 15 participants. The final workshop, held in Geneva on 2 October 2023, brought together 25 participants, facilitating an in-depth exchange between activists and municipal representatives from all four case study cities. These workshops provided additional opportunities to assess institutional responses to climate movements and compare perspectives across different governance contexts.

Additionally, participatory observation was carried out in all four cities, allowing an in-depth examination of interactions between activists and policymakers in public forums, protests, and climate-related initiatives. The observations documented activist strategies, municipal responses, and how both actors engaged with CCAs and other participatory mechanisms.

### 3.2. Instruments

The study employed three primary research instruments: semi-structured interviews, participatory workshops, and participant observation.

The interviews were guided by a set of core questions designed to explore the perceptions of activists and municipal officials regarding CCAs and their role in climate governance. These included: What are the primary demands of youth climate movements in your city? How do you perceive the role of climate citizens’ assemblies in addressing these demands? Do you feel that CCAs have met the expectations of youth climate movements? Have CCAs made young activists feel heard and influential in policymaking? How do municipal administrations perceive and engage with youth-led climate activism?

Recognizing that a common institutional response to climate movements—both youth-led and otherwise—has been the establishment of CCAs at either the local or national levels, the study specifically integrated questions about the perception of these assemblies in all interviews. These questions were asked to both current *Fridays for Future* activists and those who previously belonged to the movement but no longer identified with it. This approach enabled an analysis of how CCAs were perceived over time by activists who had remained engaged and those who had moved on.

For participant observation, a narrative observation approach was adopted, with detailed field notes documenting activist strategies, interactions with policymakers, and responses to institutional initiatives like CCAs. No structured observation guide was used; instead, key themes were identified in advance, including activist engagement with municipal processes and their reflections on CCAs in informal settings.

### 3.3. Procedure

Interviews were conducted in person or via video calls, lasting between 45 and 90 min. Each interview was recorded and transcribed for subsequent analysis. Workshops were designed as structured discussions where activists and municipal representatives reflected on the effectiveness of CCAs and broader institutional responses to youth climate activism. These discussions were documented in detailed notes and, where permitted, audio recordings.

Participant observation took place in Barcelona, Bologna, Geneva, and Paris over the course of two years. The observations focused on activist participation in public meetings, climate protests, and informal discussions. Four observers, along with five research assistants, participated in the fieldwork, and the same observers attended all events to maintain consistency.

The three years that separated the emergence of the most recent wave of youth-led climate activism from the start of fieldwork allowed for a degree of distance in analyzing institutional responses, particularly at the local level, where governance tends to be more agile than national or global politics. The study examined the context of origin, design, results, and evaluations of CCAs using multiple sources: secondary literature, official documents, and interviews with activists, experts, and municipal officials across the four cities.

The analysis of interview data was conducted using a thematic approach, identifying recurring patterns in activist and municipal official perspectives. The workshop discussions were analyzed for key themes and points of contention between activists and policymakers. Similarly, the field notes from participant observation were reviewed to track activist strategies, institutional engagement, and perceptions of CCAs. No formal coding was employed in the analysis. Data saturation was considered reached after approximately 40 interviews (10 per city), but additional interviews were conducted to capture variations across case studies (71 at the end).

This methodological framework, integrating qualitative interviews, participatory workshops, and immersive observation, provided a comparative analysis of youth climate activism and municipal responses across different political and civic engagement contexts. By triangulating these methods, the study was able to capture both institutional responses and activist strategies in a nuanced manner.

## 4. Empirical Findings: The Interplay Between Climate Activism and Institutional Responses

Our starting assumption is that the experience of collective action operates in a context where expectations and knowledge help to configure strategies. This is an exercise of voice that can increase or decrease trust in democracy in general and often leads to adapting or changing repertoires of action vis-à-vis institutions. The findings that follow detail the results of this interaction. For each case study, we delineate the context of engagement around CCAs, referring to the movement's strategies in terms of exit and voice, and we explain how this context has influenced the setup and design of CCAs.

### 4.1. Barcelona: A Case of Voice and Exit?

From 2015 to 2023, Barcelona was governed by Ada Colau, leader of Barcelona Comú, a new party created in the wake of the anti-austerity mobilizations of 2011 and with a strong presence of activists [22]. Colau's government promoted many mechanisms of citizen participation as well as concrete actions against Climate change<sup>3</sup>.

The most prominent youth-led climate movements during the period were *Fridays For Future* (FFF.BNA) and *End Fossil*<sup>4</sup>. FFF.BNA was born in February 2019. It initially

replicated the actions and speeches of its international counterpart but quickly adapted and changed its strategies. In mid-2019, the discursive framework, goals, and strategies were modified, connecting the climate concerns with the demand for gender equality and non-discrimination and added to other political demands oriented to local concerns. The networks also opened to link up with non-climatic-centered social organizations in the city. They decided to space out the mobilizations in time and break with the periodicity of the Friday strikes. The interviews reveal a change in strategy guided by the search for local impact as well as a lack of interest and distrust of public institutions as illustrated by the following quotation.

*“We didn’t see any alternative [other than street protests]. For us, it was the moment to take to the streets and demonstrate, and we saw that many young people from universities and schools shared the same frustration. It also felt like the most organic thing—what we truly wanted. What we needed was to go out, shout, and let loose. And in fact, when we tried to engage [with institutional channels], everything fell apart because it wasn’t what genuinely came from us. We wanted to protest, join other groups in the streets, organize actions, and create disruption”* (interview with former FFF.BNA2 activist, Zoom, 14 February 2023). The question of why there was such a disconnection considering that the local government had many leaders coming from social movements remains open.

In January 2020, the City Council declared a climate emergency, which derived from a participatory process that consisted of four meetings in which City Hall officials, academics, business sectors, civil society organizations linked to environmental issues, among others, participated (Barcelona City Council, 2020, for a detailed analysis see Satorras et al. 2020 [23]). Subsequently, the City Council formalized a program with specific actions. A second relevant action in response to the demands was the call for a climate assembly, which was agreed in mid-2022. The assembly was composed of one hundred people between 16 and 75 years old to participate in deliberation instances with the objective of making proposals on climate policies. Despite these actions, most of the activists interviewed recognize a negative perception of the responses and a growing disengagement: *“We went to this climate assembly partly to voice our concerns and get answers to the questions we’ve had since 2019. But of course, it never really came together because it didn’t deliver. There were lots of informal meetings with stakeholders, both grassroots groups and lobbyists, but it just didn’t happen. Even when you speak up, nothing changes. At its core, none of it translated into the concrete responses we needed. And sure, other people also participated in the assemblies, but in the end, it all felt very marginal”*. (Interview FFF.BNA activist, 11 February 2023).

Across our case studies, we find that the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted political participation and contributed to discouraging it. In Barcelona, we find that previous patterns of mobilization did not recover after the pandemic, so it is also worth considering the effect of adhering to spontaneous movements with the expectation of obtaining quick responses and the subsequent disconnection and disenchantment (to similar findings arrive Díaz-Pérez et al. [24]). Thus, the increasing demobilization and distrust in institutions shown by the activists interviewed could be understood as a result of too high expectations and a lack of information on what was done. We observe that the government was active in developing policies, although constrained by their competencies. However, the expectancy for immediate radical changes and the preference for non-institutional action led to more distrust and less mobilization. Climate change can hardly be radically attacked at the local level while participating and influencing emerged as two aspects that do not necessarily converge, particularly in assemblies (with an advisory role) [14,22].

According to our interviews and participant observation, activists prefer spontaneous contentious actions, which, however, erode their capacity to sustain claims and have an influence. By October 2023, activist mobilization in the cities studied was very fragmented

in specific and punctual collectives and the large movements such as FFF were inactive. New platforms such as *Xarxa per la Justícia Climàtica* or *EndFossil Barcelona* focused on more local forms of participation.

#### 4.2. Bologna: Voice and the Relevance of Co-Design

In 2019, the city of Bologna signed the Declaration of Climate Emergency<sup>5</sup>. The signature was the result of the convergence of different movements requesting a commitment to decisive steps to protect the climate. Among these actions was the hunger strike by activists of *Extinction Rebellion* in front of the central offices of the municipality. Youth movements have been particularly active in Bologna, including (although not only) on environmental issues. *Fridays for Future* and *Extinction Rebellion* (XR) were at the forefront of the climate movement, both locally and nationally. In Bologna, XR campaigned for instruments of deliberative democracy and particularly for the establishment of citizens' assemblies<sup>6</sup>. We find that voice was expressed through a variety of campaigning actions. Importantly, it included the demand for active participation within democratic spaces and for setting up a CCA<sup>7</sup>. With the second hunger strike of XR activists in September 2020, the movement further pushed forward the dialogue with the Municipality and obtained a public commitment from the Administration to launch a pathway entitled "A Climate of Participation". This dialogue was promoted by the Municipality and the Foundation for Urban Innovation. It culminated in 2021 with the inclusion of the instrument of the Citizen Assembly in the Municipal Statute.

A member of the political working group of XR explained to us that they were in constant dialogue with the institutions as they were drafting the rules of the CA. They worked together with Rodolfo Lewanski, a well-known professor at the University of Bologna and expert on deliberative and participatory democracy<sup>8</sup>. They also had several conversations with the Deputy Mayor of Bologna Emily Clancy and felt that they had an active role in drafting the rules. Overall, we found that the co-design of Bologna's CA was perceived in a positive way among our informants.

The first CA was convened in 2023 and addressed the topic of climate change. The assembly was composed of 100 members, out of which, 80 were over-16-years-old residents in the Municipality of Bologna and were selected based on stratified random sampling, i.e., ensuring that the sample represents the socio-demographic characteristics of the city (the sampling was carried out proportionally to the age groups, neighborhoods, and gender). In addition, the CA included 20 "city users", intended as people who spend time in the city without being residents. As it went on, activists expressed satisfaction with the initiative. As one of our interviewees among *Fridays for Future* members articulated, "CAs can be a good solution, a good rehearsal room. One needs to working on them, to see how to set them up, to make them work in the best possible way"<sup>9</sup>.

The assembly defined proposals and recommendations to make Bologna a solar, renewable, and sustainable city, accelerating a just energy transition towards a model based on the reduction of energy consumption, energy efficiency, the production and use of renewable energy, and energy communities.

The Municipal Council had to examine, debate, and decide on the proposals and recommendations formulated by the assembly within four months of the conclusion of the works as required under the Municipal Statute. We find that the need for the Municipal Council to take a formal stance was considered a crucial aspect of the CA among XR activists. The Council passed the corresponding resolution on 26 February 2024. About a third of the proposals were approved completely. The remaining two-thirds, however, were approved partially—due to elements of the proposals that fell outside the Municipality's sphere of competence—or with reservations, because they required financial assessments

prior to potential commitments. This extensive area of unclear commitments on behalf of the Municipality was largely criticized by activists. During our fieldwork, we also observed that there was little communication around the CA, and therefore little knowledge of the general public—even among university students—of the existence and the work of the assembly.

#### 4.3. Geneva: When Institutions Produce Loyalty

Like other major European cities, Geneva witnessed dynamic youth climate protests and grassroots mobilizations like *Fridays for Future* before the COVID-19 pandemic, which saw significant momentum halted by restrictions and lockdowns. Recognizing the importance of sustained youth engagement, local authorities, particularly the City of Geneva, initiated youth-targeted projects and campaigns. These initiatives aimed to encourage youth to voice their needs on social, environmental, and broader local issues by providing opportunities to communicate ideas and contribute to implementing promising proposals for local-level interventions. Overall, we observe that pre-pandemic youth-led climate mobilizations have demonstrably influenced municipal agenda, prompting a renewed commitment to action within the framework of the City's established Youth Policy, and youth-oriented projects. This policy-level development can be attributed to the effective confluence of impactful youth activism and the swift, strategic response of local institutions.

At the policy consultation level, the Canton of Geneva, in 2020–2021 decided to experiment with new forms of citizen participation by organizing one of the first-ever citizens' forums (Forum Citoyen) focused on climate issues such as mobility, green spaces, and urban planning, organized by the Territorial Department. It comprised a randomly selected group of 30 citizens reflecting Geneva's diversity in terms of age, gender, level of education, and other factors. Although not directly triggered by or specifically tailored to youth or their climate concerns, the Forum addressed the question: "How do we want to inhabit the territory of Geneva to live better together in harmony with nature and to confront climate change?" Over four weekends of work between March and May 2021, the Citizens' Forum adopted 104 measures to address the question. Interviewed young activists expressed receptiveness to democratic tools such as CCAs, despite the Forum not being youth-oriented. Climate assemblies were viewed as valuable instruments for fostering a more climate-conscious citizenry, even within a well-established direct democracy like Switzerland [26], yet—according to some interviewees—not one to substantially drive all-embracing systemic change which involves reclaiming economic power and decentralizing it, and fully encompass the concept of 'climate justice' in local and federal-level policies and actions. In particular, while recognizing the Forum's utility in engaging youth voices in deliberations and voicing concerns, some activists emphasized the need to push for broader systemic changes to shift power structures and relationships within an unfair capitalist system and a democratic system that is not adequately responsive to youth needs. At the same time, they pointed to the importance of ensuring greater inclusion of youth voices not just in elaborating recommendations (as in the case of CCAs) but especially in climate governance and policy-making.

Some interviewed youth activists highlighted their exclusion from policymaking processes more broadly, which are complex and involve various stakeholders wielding influence. They perceived that mere inclusion in deliberations in the form of CCAs was important but insufficient in effecting policy change. Youth activists expressed concern that their perspectives are often marginalized in spaces where policy decisions are actually formulated and implemented, including negotiations and policy development, which undermines their right to a sustainable future.

#### 4.4. Paris: Civil Disobedience as a Form of Voice

Paris saw the largest protests of the youth climate movement in France in 2019. At the time, Youth for Climate Paris was the city's most prominent movement, but did not have specific policy demands, including for a climate assembly. Indeed, the genealogy of the creation of the first CA in Paris (which began in November 2021) can be traced back to another social movement—the *Gilets Jaunes*. The *Gilets Jaunes*, which pushed back against President Macron's carbon tax and called for a just transition, triggered a national effort—which included the establishment of the national Citizens Convention for Climate—to establish a more direct link between citizens and political decision-making. According to the International Observatory on Participatory Democracy, the Paris Citizens' Assembly responds directly to proposals made by Parisians during the consensus conference launched by the City of Paris in 2019, echoing the "grand débat national" [15] (IOPD, 2024). Spearheaded by a group of experts, the assembly's design was then approved by the Paris Council. Paris is the first major city to approve a permanent citizen's assembly [27].

Participants over 16, selected by lottery—including electoral list members and *carte citoyenne* holders, which can include non-citizens—serve one-year mandates. Unlike adults, minors volunteer rather than being randomly chosen. The first assembly (2021–2022) formed three thematic sub-groups: social education, environment, and public space. Over six months, they explored issues, identified needs, and gathered expertise, defining work items beyond the political radar. The assembly follows an exploratory structure with periodic training. After six months, it receives a mandate to refine proposals. Its first recommendations, presented in December 2022, resulted in three collective wishes set for discussion at the Paris Council on 15 March 2023. The Council, composed of elected representatives, considers these wishes, potentially amending its rules, while the executive acts on behalf of Parisians.

According to a public servant working closely with the CA, the Mayor played a significant role in galvanizing the work of the first assembly, seeking to garner media attention. In the second iteration of the assembly, which concluded in 2024, the government of Paris adopted legislation proposed by and written by the assembly on homelessness, with DemocracyNext noting that this marks "the first time a political body has taken up and passed legislation written by citizens from all walks of life [. . .]" [28].

While not central, the environment did feature in the first iteration of the assembly, with a focus on the energy-efficient renovation of buildings. Their working mandate focused on simplifying the process of accessing renovation grants for homeowners. It is worth noting that its second iteration addressed climate adaptation and biodiversity concerns more directly through a proposal to transform 100 streets into "garden streets".

According to another public servant interviewed, the CA made efforts to engage young people involved by organizing training workshops and ensuring youth representation at the Paris Council debriefing. In parallel, we observed the emergence of several other climate movements in Paris, with a majority adopting civil disobedience tactics. Furthermore, Youth for Climate France, reported having grown more distrustful of institutional politics and made the decision in 2023 to embrace civil disobedience. Since then, activists from Youth for Climate as well as other movements such as *Soulèvements de la Terre* described facing increased police repression in their actions, pointing to a violently suppressed protest against water reservoirs in 2023 as a case in point. An interviewee dismissed such citizen assemblies as "performative," particularly criticizing the national Citizens Convention for Climate and expressing distrust of the government, while also pointing to a growing rift with both local and national authorities.

While these trends could be seen as a form of 'exit', interviewees emphasized their desire to express their 'voice' and reconnect with democratic politics through a candidate or

party they could trust. They also expressed hope that their actions would, in the words of an interviewee, “inspire fellow citizens to vote with the climate as an absolute priority” and consume more sustainably. In this context, and though ambitious, the Paris CA emerges from a whole-of-society push for greater political participation rather than a direct response to young activists’ demands. However, the city has supported the youth climate movement, notably through the Paris Climate Academy—established in 2021 as an open space for climate education—and by declaring a climate emergency in 2019.

## 5. Discussion: Key Learnings on Outcomes and Perceptions of CCAs

This section discusses key learnings about the outcomes of the Citizens’ Assemblies, focusing on the results of the four case studies in relation to the expectations and perceptions of youth climate movements. It links these outcomes to the research questions of whether CCAs responded to activists’ demands, enabled meaningful participation, and produced policy outcomes aligned with youth concerns. By mapping out and contrasting the different challenges that emerged from the case studies, it examines participation and institutional responsiveness across the four contexts.

As outlined in Table 1, the forms of participation of climate movements in CCAs vary considerably. First of all, context matters, and it does so in a broad sense, including the space, time, and institutional design of the CCAs. This became clear during a participatory workshop organized in October 2023, when activists invited from all four cities expressed comparable sentiments but very different experiences in listening to each other. This is why we find that evaluating citizens’ assemblies on their own does not bring a comprehensive understanding of its effects. At the outset of the CCA, the design process is important. In that respect, *opportunities for meaningful youth participation* varied considerably. Indeed, some of them are perceived as top-down initiatives—by contrast with protest movements that are largely perceived as bottom-up political movements. In the design phase of the four assemblies we analyzed, Bologna’s CCA has been more inclusive and was perceived as a co-constructed mechanism.

**Table 1.** Forms of participation in CCAs in each city.

Criteria/Cases	Barcelona	Bologna	Geneva	Paris
Social movements in focus	Fridays for Future and End Fossil	Fridays for Future, Extinction Rebellion	Fridays for Future, Climate Strike Geneva	Youth for Climate, Extinction Rebellion
Did they ask for a CCA?	Yes but not as a main goal	Yes	No	No
Did they co-design it?	No	Yes	No	No
Did the youth have a special role?	No	In addition to the representation based on demographics, 10 “city users” were sorted among University students	No	No

Table 1. Cont.

Criteria/Cases	Barcelona	Bologna	Geneva	Paris
Policies designed as an answer to claims	Declaration of climate emergency Program of actions Climate citizens assembly	Declaration of climate emergency Climate citizens assembly	Final Report of the Citizens' Forum	Declaration of climate emergency Program of actions Paris Climate Academy
CA results	Definition of concrete actions on energy, mobility, and consumption.	Six recommendations divided into twenty-four proposals and one hundred and twenty-six actions. Proposals have been included as an integral part of the City Climate Contract, a pact signed by public and private entities, promoted within the broader Bologna Climate Mission, which aims to achieve climate neutrality by 2030.	104 measures on five key themes: sustainable urban living, inclusive urban planning, biodiversity and quality of life, local consumption, and eco-friendly mobility to meet future standards. These were validated by the Council of State in 2022 and implementation progress discussed in follow-up public meetings (2022–2023) with officials incl. officials from Canton's Department of Public Education, Training and Youth	In 2024, the government of Paris adopted the Citizen Bill, a legislation proposed by and written by the assembly on the issue of homelessness.
Youth movements	Fridays for Future dissolved and End Fossil moved to more local actions	Cooperation across movements, within and beyond environmental issues	Fridays for Future, Climate Strike Geneva	Youth for Climate embraces civil disobedience tactics, new civil disobedience movements emerge

Sources: On Geneva's CCA constitution, process, and outcomes refer to: Citizen Forum; Constitution of the first Citizens' Forum in Geneva: the final draw took place on 15 September 2020; From chance to deliberation: the Citizens' Forum in Geneva; 2022 analysis report of the Citizens' Forum measures; 2023 Review of Citizens' Forum Measures. On Barcelona <http://hdl.handle.net/11703/134307> (accessed on 15 June 2025).

The Bologna CCA was also a direct answer to the youth activists, unlike Barcelona, Geneva, and Paris where the CCA was a more top-down initiative. Only in Bologna did the youth have an engaging role in designing the assembly, through the steering role of XR. In Geneva, the CCA incorporated an intergenerational approach, ensuring its members reflected the Canton's diversity. This included youth activists who participated in the CCA's expert deliberations, allowing young voices to be heard and their perspectives to contribute to the process, even without distinctive youth roles within the CCA itself. Therefore, all four institutional contexts were open to voice, it was the formalization of the space for voice that made the variance.

The distinction between strictly top-down and bottom-up institutional processes often blurs in practice [29]. Research highlights that deliberative mechanisms attracting lobbying from environmental activists—common in climate-focused assemblies like the Convention Citoyenne pour le Climat—demonstrate this dynamic. For example, activists from

groups such as Extinction Rebellion influenced the Convention Citoyenne's deliberations by engaging directly with citizens during intersessions. These interactions blurred the lines between contestation and deliberation, fostering hybrid governance models [30]. However, even bottom-up designs are not immune to limitations in outcome. Institutional mechanisms, such as legal committees tasked with filtering citizen proposals to ensure feasibility, can dilute grassroots input, constraining the participatory ethos and diminishing the transformative potential of citizen-driven processes [31].

Thus, second, attention to outcomes and their perception must complement an evaluation of context and design. In terms of *CCAs addressing youth demands and translating into concrete policy outcomes*, among the cities studied, the case of Geneva stands out in exemplifying a high level of institutional responsiveness with over 100 proposals generated and some implemented. In interviews, authorities expressed commitment to integrating proposals from the CCA into policy planning and committed to monitoring their implementation. In particular, following the assembly, cantonal authorities and policymakers (also those who are engaged in education, training, and youth policy) met with Forum members and the public, which included young people, to discuss the progress of the CCA's policy proposals. This ongoing dialogue showcased increased institutional support for the CCA process, while the subsequent public exchanges fostered a sense of trust and collaboration between citizens and institutions on climate action.

Overall, the intergenerational approach of the CCA deliberations and subsequent public exchanges, where the mix of generations enriched discussions with unique perspectives, was considered valuable. Bologna's CCA similarly demonstrated substantive follow-through, with several of its recommendations feeding directly into municipal climate planning. Still, challenges around communication and public visibility diminished perceptions of its broader success. Paris achieved the most symbolically significant result—the adoption of a citizen-authored bill—but its focus on homelessness was less fully aligned with the core environmental concerns of youth climate movements. Concurrently, our study of Barcelona suggests that there was a gap between the institutional responses of Barcelona City Council and the demands of young people. In the analysis we noticed that young people demand different types of policies to confront climate change, some of them more macro (changing the production model) and others more limited to the local scenario (changes in waste management). However, there is little knowledge of what is being done at the institutional level, and distrust and preference for contentious and poorly organized participation prevail (in addition to the interviews, these data are confirmed by previous studies and by the opinion studies that we reference in the discussion of literature). This largely explains why with the passage of time and the pandemic the trend has been towards demobilization.

In Geneva, the openness of the process described above was perceived as creating an opportunity for everyone, including young voices, to express themselves, collaborate, and consider diverse viewpoints. In this context, post-CCA, Geneva's youth climate activism continued, albeit with less intensity than in pre-pandemic times. While the movement's momentum has slowed, with some disillusioned activists stepping back, others remain committed. These young activists have brought creativity, urgency, and a willingness to align their goals with other social and feminist causes. They emphasize the need for immediate action and stronger measures that prioritize social justice and reduce the influence of economic lobbies. They believe institutions have failed to adequately acknowledge the climate emergency and criticize them for inadequate policies and targets that often perpetuate injustice.

### *Implications for Youth Climate Movements*

Drawing on Hirschman's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* framework, the Geneva case can be seen as situated between 'voice' and 'loyalty'. Instead of exiting or deviating from democratic structures, young climate activists seek to embed their message within them. They aim to leverage government and institutional support, raise awareness, and foster a sense of collective responsibility by also seeking to link local and global efforts for climate justice. Their goal is to expand democracy, not impose a "climate dictatorship", as they see the current system as inadequate for addressing the climate crisis. They perceive popular assemblies like the CCA positively, recognizing them as channels for collective solutions to this shared challenge. Importantly, they advocate for more youth involvement in decision-making and policymaking believing it is crucial for maximizing the effectiveness of tools such as CCAs in addressing youth climate claims on the ground.

Outcomes are therefore closely related to perceptions. In Paris, young activists perceived civic space as shrinking rather than expanding, highlighting a widening gap between them and the City of Paris. Many interviewees knew little about or were uninterested in the Paris Citizens Assembly, likely because it addressed a broader democratic crisis rather than the climate crisis. Instead, discussions often centered on the "contradictions" of socialist Mayor Anne Hidalgo, seen as failing to tackle the systemic causes of climate change—such as continuing to allow corporate advertising across the city. The decision of *Youth for Climate* to move from a protest-based form of mobilization to civil disobedience reflects this, as is young activists' perception that police repression of activism nationally has increased in recent years under the new government. With mobilizations remaining high, whether this represents a trend towards 'exit' or whether civil disobedience can be understood as a form of 'voice' is debatable. Disobedience was not framed as antidemocratic by young activists: rather, their stated commitment in interviews was frequently to raise awareness among fellow citizens and shift public opinion on climate through their actions, thus influencing the outcome of elections.

The dynamics of repertoire change, with the growing importance of civil disobedience, can be observed in Italy as well, in a context where political opportunities seem lacking [32]. Attempts to reconnect young activists with institutional mechanisms of participation have generated mixed results. In Bologna, our study pointed to a diffuse perception among young activists of a disconnection between the CCA and the ongoing engagement and mobilizations on climate issues. Interestingly, this perception was shared by the participant in the assembly whom we interviewed in May 2024: aged 29 at the time, she was not part of any movement before joining the CCA but it was her participation that aroused her awareness of environmental issues, which made her join a local group after the assembly. We, therefore, see here the creation of a link from the mini-public to the local environmental movements—in a second phase, after the CCA. In this sense, 'voice' develops across different spaces, albeit disconnected: our interviewee felt that overall the assembly did not have much contact with the outside world nor with the ongoing events of the mobilizations and environmental issues that affected the area of Bologna. However, to her, the assembly was something certainly innovative, valuable, and important to be implemented, despite being an instrument of democratic innovation still in its embryonic phase and, therefore, not at its maximum potential, on the contrary.

This brings us to the follow-up aspect, which, we suggest, is crucial when assessing the assemblies' outcomes. In Bologna, as we noted in the previous section, communication seemed lacking, both during and after the CCA. Our informants insisted that the municipal administration ought to be much more active in informing citizens and in deepening its communication capacity about the existence of spaces for participation such as the assembly. In all four cities we studied, communication emerged as an important factor to

establish the legitimacy of the instrument. It should also be considered in the follow-up activities after assemblies, such as public consultations convened by local authorities, as it was the case in Geneva where, one year after the CCA, representatives of the Canton explained to the public which measures had been implemented. Other follow-up activities may involve participants in the assemblies themselves, such as in Bologna where they were instrumental in launching a monitoring committee. This committee meets with the municipal administration to discuss and verify the progress of the climate mission.

In Barcelona, the disconnection and dissatisfaction of the youth led to demobilization, as a general path, and relocation on very local and specific actions for a few activists. Returning to Hirschman, our research finds that rather than ascribing voice to one form of political expression rather than another, it is the perception of whether voice can find resonance in democratic innovations such as CCAs that appears to influence outcomes in terms of both policies and perceptions of the system. Efforts by governments—local or national—to harness the voice of social movements into mini-publics must be complemented by broader efforts of inclusivity and accountability. From this perspective, we would like to conclude by suggesting that, in order to uphold their promises, mini-publics such as CCAs should be posited and communicated as the premise of a longer and broader process of engagement. They need to be followed up and complemented by actions both within and outside formal democratic spaces. This is central to their perceived and effective outcomes, not only among young activists but also more broadly among citizens at large.

## 6. Conclusions

Widespread concern about the future influences citizens' priorities, actions, and aspirations, with young people feeling these challenges most harshly. By joining climate movements, young citizens and children express their anxiety and their urgent call for action. This sense of urgency inevitably affects the way in which they perceive the response provided by institutions. In this perspective, the four CCAs analyzed here have been received in a rather critical way by young climate activists. CCAs have fulfilled only very partially their claim for more voice in formal democratic spaces. This finding directly answers our research question on how youth perceive CCAs and their impact on engagement. The awareness of the possibilities associated with instruments of deliberative democracy has also shaped expectations. Amid a context of established forms of semi-direct democracy, the Citizens Assembly in Geneva has brought about more positive perceptions among interviewees than in the other three cities. There, the assembly was viewed as one of several instruments of consultation. Interviewees in our case studies perceive only a low, sometimes even minimal or absent, impact of CCAs on effective policy outcomes in their cities. They therefore understand CCAs as mechanisms generating limited political influence. As seen in Barcelona, a lack of alignment between institutional responses and activist expectations can lead to distrust, demobilization, or even disengagement. In this sense, voice can lead to the renewal of democratic spaces but also to exit.

This article therefore contends that perceptions of outcomes are critical to assessing the effects of CCAs on the broader process of engagement. However, these perceptions need to be put in perspective with the actual context of participation around CCAs. In fact, the design of that instrument matters: participatory processes in that phase have given an active role to environmental movements in Bologna, which fulfilled their expectations in this specific phase and realm. Through its analysis, according to these two dimensions—perceptions and institutional setup—the article showed that youth engagement with CCAs should be analyzed both in practice and in how they shape their perception of this possibility of “voice”. While CCAs provide opportunities for inclusion and voice, their effectiveness in addressing youth climate movements' expectations is contingent upon institutional

responsiveness, follow-up mechanisms, and communication strategies. They are most effective when designed inclusively, allowing young people to contribute meaningfully, and when paired with robust mechanisms for implementation and feedback.

Our findings have broader implications for the field of democratic innovation and youth political engagement. In particular, they suggest that while CCAs can be a tool for inclusion, their impact on long-term youth participation depends on how well they integrate into existing institutional structures and political cultures. Policy design should take into account not only the procedural aspects of CCAs but also their ability to generate trust, ensure continuity, and link deliberative democracy with decision-making processes. These elements are essential for designing policies that effectively integrate youth participation and align with their expectations.

This article examined the potential and challenges of local citizens' assemblies in engaging youth climate movements and addressing their demands. However, there are limitations to this study that should be acknowledged. A key limitation of this analysis lies in its qualitative approach, which, while valuable for capturing contextual nuances, does not provide a systematic comparison of the four cases. Additionally, the temporal gap between data collection (2022–2023) and the events analyzed (some dating back to 2019–2020) may have influenced participants' retrospective accounts and perceptions. The depth of insights gathered was also affected by factors such as variations in the availability and willingness of respondents, as well as in the number of intended respondents reached. These limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings, as they may have shaped the comparative analysis across cases. Future research could address these constraints by employing a longitudinal approach, extending data collection periods, and incorporating mixed-method designs to triangulate insights from multiple sources. Further investigation into the role of communication in bridging the gap between institutional initiatives and youth mobilization is particularly needed to understand how engagement can be sustained beyond the initial deliberative process.

Despite these constraints, the findings have important implications for both democratic participation and societal engagement with climate governance. By highlighting the perceived limitations of CCAs in meeting youth expectations, this study underscores the risk of disillusionment with institutional participation, which can lead to disengagement or fuel growing skepticism toward formal democratic processes. At the same time, the results point to the potential of well-designed CCAs to serve as meaningful platforms for dialogue between policymakers and young climate activists, provided they are not viewed as standalone solutions but as the starting point of a broader process of democratic innovation that ties into key strengths and weaknesses of the local context. Their success depends on sustained engagement, inclusivity, and accountability, both within and beyond formal democratic spaces. By addressing these challenges, CCAs, particularly those at the local level, can evolve into more effective tools for addressing the important challenge of building new bridges between mobilized youth and political institutions in the climate crisis.

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European Research Council [ERC], etc.). Research projects not falling under this category but (a) potentially presenting significant ethical risks or (b) requiring ethics approval for journal publications or (c) requiring ethics approval for the conduct of field work (i.e., the granting of local ethics approvals) may be referred to the Ethics Review Committee by way of exception.”. In terms of type (institutional) and content our project does not required Institutional Review Board approval because it does not engage sensitive information and interviews are anonymized.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Accepting the requests proposed by *Extinction Rebellion* and other citizen movements, the declaration makes explicit reference to the concept of climate justice, and therefore to the need to intervene to prevent the impacts of climate change from being harsher on the weakest sections of the population.
- <sup>2</sup> We acknowledge a debate with some scholars differentiating deliberative and participatory tools as belonging to different families. Here we assume that such division comes from idealised normative expectations of deliberative theories rather than from practices and concrete outcomes in which all these mechanisms are designed to address democratic deficits including citizens’ participation and are conditioned by power struggles (see Zarembek and Welp 2019 [1]).
- <sup>3</sup> In 2018 was launched the Barcelona Climate Plan (2018–2030) resulted of a participatory process. It includes 242 actions, split into five areas (i.e., people first, starting at home, transforming communal spaces, climate economy, and building together) and 18 lines of action (e.g., no energy or water supply cuts, conserving the seafront, zero waste, or cultural action for the climate). See Satorras et al. (2020) [23].
- <sup>4</sup> In instagram [fridaysforfuture.bcn](https://www.instagram.com/fridaysforfuture.bcn/) (no longer active) and in X @EndFossilBCN.
- <sup>5</sup> See note 1 above.
- <sup>6</sup> See for example Lewanski [25].
- <sup>7</sup> <https://extinctionrebellion.it/chi-siamo/assemblee-cittadine/> Accessed 20 June 2025.
- <sup>8</sup> See note 4 above.
- <sup>9</sup> Interview conducted on 16 July 2023 (our translation from Italian to English).

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