Citizens’ Assemblies

Citizens’ Assemblies are attempts to encourage all citizens to participate in governance. Although the roots of ‘participatory and deliberative democracy’ can be traced back to ancient Athens, there is renewed interest in the concept today, and experiments have taken place in Canada, the Netherlands, the U.K., Poland, and in India. In Canada and The Netherlands the topic was electoral reform. In Andhra Pradesh the topic was the future of farming in the state. Here a group of small farmers, after hearing from experts, concluded that the state should allow local community control over farming, and rejected the state’s preferred option of GM crops and increased mechanization.

Perhaps the best publicised Citizens’ Assemblies to date have taken place in Ireland, where they played an important role in influencing recent referenda on abortion and same sex marriage.

While Citizens’ Assemblies can take different forms, the core features remain the same. These are the random selection of participants which may reflect a cross-section of the population; facilitated discussion of an important issue after inputs from experts and proponents/opponents of different perspectives; and a final report which may contain recommendations for action.

A Citizens’ Assembly, which can number between 20 – 200 participants, dissolves once its task is completed and a new one is randomly selected for a new topic. Citizens’ Assemblies are run by a team of coordinators whose impartiality is essential and who have no stake in any particular outcome. They are responsible for overseeing the process of random selection, inviting experts, stakeholders and facilitators, and ensuring the outcomes from the process would be shared with the relevant people for consideration.

Relevance to Auroville

Citizens’ Assemblies could address particular challenges which hamper the Auroville community at the moment. For example, our current selection process leaves many people feeling excluded and believing that the current process is biased. Random selection prevents these potential or perceived biases as, potentially, everyone in Auroville has the same opportunity to participate and have their voice heard.

Again, very few voices are currently being heard in the collective space, yet we need more people to participate and be engaged if we are to shape an inclusive collective future.

Finally, and perhaps most important of all, the process very much aligns with the Auroville value of unending education. Often, when we are called to decide upon important issues, it is difficult to obtain all the necessary information, but at Citizen’s Assemblies there is an attempt to present all the data and perspectives on an issue. Participants also learn critical
thinking and how to recognise personal biases and biased information. As these skills and capacities spread within the community they will help build a more conscious and mature collective.

While citizens’ assemblies have much to offer, they are not seen as a replacement for our present selection process and organization. Rather, they could be another way of empowering the Residents Assembly and supporting the work of the working groups.

The small group interested in exploring citizens’ assemblies has now begun informing the larger community about the concept. Feedback so far has been largely positive, even enthusiastic. At the same time, various points have been raised for consideration.

This is why the core group is considering running a small pilot next year to try to find some answers. It may well be that citizens’ assemblies in their current form will need to be adapted to the particular conditions of Auroville. For example, in the first pilot participants will be randomly selected from the Master’s List rather than from any specific category. But in the context of current attempts to reinvigorate our collective and include more people in our civic deliberations, they seem to hold promising possibilities.

To learn more about the process of sortition and how it is being applied around the world, see:  
https://www.ted.com/talks/brett_hennig_what_if_we_replaced_politicians_with_randomly_selected_people and https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/sortition_around_the_globe