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What if a citizens' assembly were to redesign the Cyprus peace process?

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Key points:

- Design-driven methods can aid knowledge sharing and co-production
- Any citizens' assembly requires careful, inclusive and context-specific planning
- Creative practices such as interspecies council can prompt and facilitate the imaginative (as well as the practical and critical) capacities of assembly members, but they require careful, inclusive, context-specific planning.

Introduction

Could a deliberative process, such as a citizens' assembly, be used to design a future peace process for Cyprus? Could creative practices, such as a pre-assembly inter-species council, help to activate the imagination of members of such an assembly? These questions were at the heart of a workshop held in 2024 at the Home for Cooperation, a community centre located within the UN-controlled buffer zone in Nicosia.

Cyprus has passed its longest ever period without any negotiations to solve the Cyprus problem. Civil society actors in Cyprus, such as the Cyprus Peace and Dialogue Centre (CPDC), via its C-Up initiative, are pressing for greater public involvement in the peace process (CPDC 2024a, 2024b). Likewise, the Secretary-General of the United Nations has called for 'inclusive cooperation and links between the two communities now, and ultimately in the peace process' (UNSC 2024).

One mechanism through public involvement might be increased is a citizens' assembly, in which a representative group of people draw on expert evidence and lived experience to collaboratively generate policy recommendations for policy-makers (Mullen 2024). Such processes have a long history (Landemore 2020), and have been used by governments all over the world to address a range of policy issues (OECD 2020, Curato et al. 2022 Chapter 2), but never in Cyprus.

One important consideration when designing a citizens' assembly, especially one that addresses an issue over which views are polarised, is how to ensure 'careful consideration and integration of multiple and opposing perspectives' (Muradova and Arceneaux 2022, 741). One way of doing this is to ensure that members are prompted and facilitated to 'actively imagin[e] the 'experiences, perspectives and feelings' of others (Muradova 2021, 647. See also Muradova 2025).

A second important consideration in designing a citizens' assembly, especially one that addresses themes of systemic transformation, is how to ensure that members are prompted and facilitated to consider a wide range of alternative outcomes. One way of doing this is to ensure that members are given opportunities to 'experience[e] what else is possible', and this requires an emphasis on imagination alongside 'analytical and rational' thinking (Robinson 2022).

Polarisation and systemic transformation are key themes in the Cyprus peace process. Members of any island-wide deliberative process must be able to (empathetically) imagine the perspectives of 'other', and (systemically) imagine alternatives to the status quo (Perry-Kessaris forthcoming 2026). One method of activating the imagination, recently tested by the UK government, is an interspecies council, in which humans represent the perspective of non-human species in facilitated discussion (Sabherwal and Sharma 2022).

This intervention reports on the innovative, design-driven methodology used in the 2024 workshop; and on the key insights that it generated around risks and rewards associated with proposing the use of citizens' assemblies and of creative methods in the Cyprus context.

The workshop

The workshop was organised by the authors: a UK-based academic; the director of an independent consultancy with experience of the Cyprus peace process, who is based in the south of the island; and the director of a non-governmental organisation dedicated to promoting peace and dialogue, who is based in the north of the island. Twenty participants with experience of involvement in the Cyprus peace process were selected to represent a balance of identities, especially with respect to origin (north and south of the island) and gender. The workshop was governed by the University of Kent Research Ethics Policies and Practice framework (University of Kent Research Ethics and Governance webpage).

Our methodology was designerly, meaning that it drew on insights and methods from design-based disciplines (Perry-Kessaris 2021): We encouraged a simultaneously practical-critical-imaginative mindset; we sought wherever possible to make ideas visible and tangible; we emphasised experimentation; and we attended to the needs and wants of our participants and the people of Cyprus more generally.

The workshop was structured in two parts, the first focusing on citizens' assemblies, the second focusing on interspecies councils. Each included elements of knowledge exchange and of experimental co-production.

The following sections explain the design and findings of each part of the workshop.

Part A: Citizens' assemblies

This Part of the workshop explored the idea that a citizens' assembly could be used to design a future peace process for Cyprus.

We began with a brief introduction to citizens' assemblies: what they are, where and for what purposes they have been used, what 'good' they can do, and what are the necessary conditions for their success. Here we relied exclusively on resources from DemocracyNext because it is widely regarded as an independent and innovative leader in the field of open democracy, produces extensive freely available and practical materials, and has a transnational focus.

Next, workshop participants were invited to complete two 'briefs' which were designed to highlight two conditions of success for any citizens' assembly, and to support participants to begin to consider how to secure them in Cyprus. Here our key reference was *Assembling an Assembly*, a 'step-by-step guide on how to design, run, and act on the results of a Citizens' Assembly' produced by Democracy Next.

Brief 1 What questions could a citizens' assembly answer?

One condition for the success of any citizens' assembly is that it must be directed towards a 'clear task' which is 'linked to a defined public problem' (Democracy Next undated 1.1). Although they will always involve deliberation around an issue over which there is disagreement, the nature of the issue and of the disagreement will vary widely according to context. Furthermore, some issues and some disagreements are not amenable to the kind of compromise that deliberative processes require (O'Flynn and Setälä 2022).

So Brief 1 invited participants to consider what kinds of questions a citizens' assembly charged with contributing to the redesign of the Cyprus peace process might reasonably be able to address. Specifically, participants were invited to assess the potential suitability of a prepared list of questions against criteria identified by Democracy Next; as well as to propose their own (DemocracyNext 2023). It was made clear that the prepared questions were selected to encourage discussion, not because they were seen by the organisers to be suitable for a citizens' assembly.

This Brief achieved its primary aim of encouraging participants to engage in detailed and informed discussion about a specific practical challenge associated with designing citizens' assemblies. There was no observable consensus among participants as to what question might be 'suitable' for consideration in a citizens' assembly. Participants did, however, appear to agree that two of the five proposed questions are unsuitable, in the sense that neither was identified as being 'suitable' by any group, and both were identified as 'unsuitable' by at least one group. Of these 'unsuitable' questions, Question 1 'What questions should the negotiators tackle?' was described as 'too broad'; and Question 5 'How (if at all) should the people of Cyprus be involved in choosing the outcome of the peace process?', was described as 'too narrow'. Both criteria are specified in Democracy Next resources.

Brief 2 What information would assembly members need?

A second condition for the success of a citizens' assembly is that its members must 'have access to a wide range of accurate, relevant, and accessible evidence and expertise', and 'the opportunity to hear from and question' experts (Democracy Next undated 1.1. See also Curato et al. 2021, Chapter 5).

So Brief 2 invited participants to identify specific types of information that assembly members would need in order to perform their role, and from where such information might be sourced.

Again, this Brief achieved its primary aim of encouraging informed and detailed discussion among participants about a practical challenge associated with designing citizens' assemblies. It also generated productive discussion around access to information about the Cyprus peace process. For example, two groups focused on what information would be required by a citizens' assembly charged with answering Question 4 'How (if at all) should the people of Cyprus be involved in negotiating possible outcomes of the peace process?'; and a third focused on Question 2 'What aspects of the peace process should the people of Cyprus be updated about along the way?'. All three of these groups identified the lack of accessible information about the Cyprus peace 'process up to now', including 'convergences and disagreements', and 'what technical committees do', as an important gap to be filled by experts. They proposed that experts could be drawn from former chief negotiators, technical committees, and a chronology of the Cyprus peace process produced by the Cyprus Dialogue Forum (undated).

Part B: Interspecies councils

A third condition for the success of a citizens' assembly is that assembly members must be able to deliberate: 'to find common ground to underpin their collective recommendations' through, among other things, 'careful and active listening' and 'weighing and considering multiple perspectives' (Democracy Next 1.1. See also Curato et al. 2021 Chapter 4). More specifically, Democracy Next suggest that the 'overall experience and quality' of a citizens' assembly can be enhanced by 'build[ing] up skills' that are 'useful for deliberation' and that 'open up the imagination of what is possible for Members.' They point to a range of 'creative ways' in which to make that happen, including 'collective imagining of alternative futures', and 'thinking from the perspective of future generations or the natural world' (Democracy Next 2.2). So Part B of the Workshop explored the idea that a pre-assembly interspecies council could be used to activate the imagination of members of a citizens' assembly charged with designing a future peace process in Cyprus, so that they might be better prepared to engage in deliberation with unknown others about alternative possible futures.

We began with an introduction to what interspecies councils are, how they have been used by government and civil society actors, and what 'good' they can do. Here we relied on two examples of existing practice. The first was an interspecies council focused on the River Roding run by Policy Lab, a design-driven unit with the UK Government Civil Service, and Moral Imaginations, an independent research and practice centre (Sabherwal and Sharma 2022). The second was the Treaty of Finsbury Park, 'an immersive fiction that looks at what it would be like if other species were to rise up and demand equal rights with humans' a project run by non-governmental arts-driven organisation, Furtherfield, and focused on Finsbury Park in London. We also used the CreaTures Framework (a resource developed out of research conducted by academics, creative practitioners, artists, policy makers and others) to locate interspecies councils as part of a wide range of creative practices that are increasingly used to prompt and facilitate social transformation.

Next, workshop participants were invited to complete two 'briefs' designed to enable them to understand how interspecies councils work, and to consider how they, or other forms of creative practice, might contribute to the overall experience and quality of a citizens assembly charged with designing a future peace process in Cyprus.

Brief 3 What is it like to participate in an interspecies council?

Brief 3 invited participants to take part in a mini interspecies council.

Each participant was randomly allocated a non-human species which is found on the island or in surrounding waters. The species were selected with an eye to diversity, including, for example, plant, animal, and insect; land and sea-based; indigenous, endemic, introduced and invasive; contemporary and extinct; wild, domesticated, and feral. Participants were provided with an image and basic information relating to their species, including, for example, its life span, size, habitat, and distinctive characteristics and behaviours.

This strategy of species and information selection seems to have been broadly effective. One group observed that the range of species and information provided about them was 'Excellent ... We all learnt something.' A second group explained that the species descriptions helped them to consider specific experiences and perspectives related to gender (parrot fish), invasion (lion fish), migration (flamingo), loss of culture (pigmy hippopotamus), the limits of geopolitical division (cat). However, a third group observed that the selection and information was '[a] bit apolitical and sanitised maybe (no donkeys, for example)'—this is a reference to the fact that the Cypriot donkey was deliberately not included because it has a particular connotations in inter-communal Cypriot relations, and might divert attention away from the non-human world (Nuttall and Smith 2012).

Participants were asked to spend time individually learning about, and 'inhabiting' their species. They were then asked to represent that species in a group discussion, and in particular to try to share insights from their species with others. Insights offered included that:

- any species can disappear (pigmy hippopotamus); we only live once and our time is short (Cyprus cow);
- those who we see as 'invaders' might be coming in peace, are likely to be adaptable, and we can learn from them (lionfish);
- those who we see as indigenous or local may actually have come from elsewhere (prickly pear); we can change over our lifetime (parrot fish);
- we all came from the same place, and we are all equal (cuttlefish);
- in the process of growing we can build connections with and strengthen others (pillow coral);
- the ability to move without regard to boundaries makes us feel free, but also brings us into contact with unfamiliar, free-moving, others (Cyprus cat);
- survival depends partly on the individual, partly on the collective (olive tree);
- some of us have important hidden pasts, and cooperation is the best defence (cicada).

It is noteworthy that a significant amount of the discussion focused on description of the characteristics of the species. In future iterations, this activity could be scaffolded to guide participants more specifically towards identifying and sharing transferable knowledge and insights that are relevant to developing empathetic and systemic imagination (or whatever the capacity that is the focal point of a future iteration may be).

Brief 4 Could a pre-assembly interspecies council be useful?

Brief 4 invited participants to reflect on how their capacity for (empathetic and systemic) imagination was impacted by their experience of the mini interspecies council; and on how, if at all, the imaginative capacity of members of a future citizens' assembly might be impacted.

Participants reported that they found the mini interspecies council to be an engaging and productive experience. For example, one group observed that '[i]t was certainly a fun and nice/useful experience. It allowed us to step into something else's shoes, that's for sure'; another that 'it did help' to prompt and facilitate empathy. Another group observed that the 'position[s]' we adopt in relation to an issue are 'based on [our] individual past experience and needs', and participation in an inter-species council might make assembly members 'more inclined to use empathy.'

Participants generally indicated that it might, in principle, be useful to hold an interspecies council in preparation for a citizens' assembly on redesigning the Cyprus peace process. However, there were reservations. One group felt that they 'needed to spend more time on the interspecies council experience' to know for sure. Another suggested that it 'depends on the context', and especially on whether a sufficient link was established between the interspecies council ('the imaginary part') and the substantive focus of the assembly ('the "real/political" questions asked'), and that 'Cypriot culture [is] tricky in that regard.' A third group was 'a bit sceptical about the instrumental value of interspecies council' in relation to the Cyprus peace process. They further observed that '[t]here are many exercises out there', that 'this one may be beneficial and inspiring only for a small fraction of the participants', and that it '[m]ight be more useful when preparing assemblies on environmental issues'. A fourth group suggested that it might be better to get assembly members to represent members of another (human) community, rather than another species.

Furthermore, some participants suggested that their confidence around whether a pre-assembly interspecies council might be useful in Cyprus was constrained by lack of time. First, once group felt that they generally ‘needed to spend more time on the interspecies council experience’. Second, during the feedback element of the exercise participants were, in the interests of time, encouraged to report back on their answers to the question ‘what knowledge about the past, present or future can you share with the other species?’. One group suggested that they might have been better able to determine the impact of the exercise on their ability to empathise if we had instead asked them to report back on those questions which related more to ‘emotions: how do you feel about your situation’, what are you ‘hopes fears.’

Finally, one group observed that ‘[p]eople were very excited about their own species and describing it. That did not leave much time for empathizing with others. We got attached to our identities.’ They suggested that this problem could be overcome by asking each participant to represent a series of different species during the interspecies council.

Conclusion

Three general findings emerged from the Workshop:

- It is reasonable to anticipate general support from civil society actors across the island for exploring the potential of citizens’ assemblies in Cyprus, although not necessarily specifically in relation to designing the future peace process.
- Any citizens’ assembly requires careful, inclusive and context-specific planning—all the more when charged with addressing a topic as complex and contentious as the design of the Cyprus peace process.
- Any citizens’ assembly addressing the future of the Cyprus peace process should prompt and facilitate the imaginative (as well as the practical and critical) capacities of members. It should also make space for emotion. Creative practices such as interspecies council have the potential to help in this regard, but they require careful, inclusive, Cyprus-specific planning.

Our next steps are to continue to:

- Gather and share knowledge around the concept of deliberative democracy, especially citizens’ assemblies, and around supporting creative practices, including interspecies councils;
- Test potential support for these and other devices from other stakeholders such as public authorities, private enterprises, and international bodies;
- Gather and share expert Cypriot insights into the potential risks and rewards associated with these devices.

Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Contributor Statement

APK, FM and MOS conceptualised and designed the study. APK wrote the first and subsequent drafts of the manuscript, with comments from FM and MOS.

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Research ethics statement

The workshop underpinning this paper was designed under the guidance of the Kent Law School Ethics Committee and in accordance with the University of Kent Research Ethics Policies and Practice framework.

Experimentation on humans and animals statement

This research complies with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

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