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Children and young people’s assemblies against the backdrop of the European Green Deal: opportunities for consolidating and extending a sustainable and democratic transition

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ABSTRACT

The European Green Deal sets out a framework of far-reaching policy commitments in response to climate breakdown and biodiversity loss. Drawing on a qualitative study exploring a children and young people’s citizens’ assembly on biodiversity loss which took place in Ireland in 2022, this article explores how children and young people position themselves within, and take action to address, these significant global challenges, and how these perspectives and experiences compare and contrast against the theoretical and policy framework underpinning the EGD. The article considers representations and experiences of children within deliberative environmental decision-making, factors shaping effective deliberative democracy, and acts of environmental citizenship across multiple spheres of influence. The article argues that, if it is to fulfil its commitment to place citizens at the heart of the transition, the EGD must ensure children and young people’s participation, and that children’s perspectives can strengthen actions pursued within transformative policy.

KEYWORDS

Biodiversity loss; children’s rights; citizens’ assemblies; deliberative democracy; environmental rights; child participation

1. Introduction

The European Green Deal (EGD) was launched by the European Commission in December 2019, setting out a roadmap towards a fair and sustainable European society, and net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The EGD makes clear the threats climate change and environmental degradation pose to citizens and future generations, and pledges to place citizens at the centre of the transition (European Commission 2019b). However, against a backdrop of wider democratic recession, systems of environmental governance and processes of decision making have been criticised for their exclusive nature and their slow response to climate breakdown and biodiversity loss, with the EGD itself compromised (Buzogány, Parks, and Torney 2025). Recent literature has considered the role that citizens are expected to play in delivering the transformation envisaged by

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the EGD, both through lifestyle changes and participation in the creation and implementation of policy (Machin 2025; Machin and Tan 2024). There has been limited focus on the position of children and young people in relation to the EGD.

It is striking, indeed, that EGD Communication is largely silent on the participation of children and young people. This is not necessarily surprising: despite engagement in citizenship practices (Larkins 2014), children and young people are often not recognised as members of society with ‘legitimate and valuable voice and perspectives’ (Roche 1999, p.479), and are deemed future citizens rather than current active ones (Jans 2004). Despite systemic exclusion from decision-making on environmental issues, children and young people are advocating for their rights to be heard, and for a healthy, clean and sustainable environment. The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, the implementing body of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), clarified the relationship between children’s rights, the environment and climate change in General Comment No.26 (2023), providing authoritative guidance to the 196 State signatories of the UNCRC on how to promote, protect and respect children’s rights pertaining to environmental issues. The general comment was informed by contributions from over 16,300 children from across 121 countries gathered through a series of global consultations co-designed with a global children’s advisory team (UNCRC 2023). Despite valid criticisms of the UNCRC (see, for example, Alderson 2017; Bentley 2005; Wells 2009), there has been an international shift towards recognising children as participatory rights-holders (Tisdall and Punch 2012) and growing acceptance that children have important contributions to make in their societies (Daly 2018). This recognition supports exploration of not only children and young people’s position within the EGD, but also at the nexus of the EGD and wider democracy.

Recent scholarship and practice have sought to experiment with new ways to include citizens in decision-making. One form of citizens’ participation that has gained increasing visibility and attention in recent years is that of *citizens’ assemblies* - processes in which randomly-selected, diverse, representative members of the public are invited to become more informed on an issue, engage in respectful, reasoned discussions with one another, and develop public recommendations (see Curato et al. 2021; Harris 2019; Ryan and Smith 2014 for definitions). Their use has grown rapidly. In 2021, the OECD reported that 566 deliberative processes had taken place since 1979 and that 67% of them occurred in the previous 10 years (OECD 2021). Despite an increasing body of literature concerning citizens’ assemblies, there remains a paucity of examples of, and empirical research on, children and young people’s involvement in these processes (see Nishiyama 2023; Reid 2023).

This article seeks to explore the role of children and young people within a broader ecosystem framed by the EGD and wider European policies, considering representation, participation and intergenerational justice. More specifically, it examines the experiences of children and young people in Ireland who participated in an innovative and experimental deliberative mini-public. It presents findings from a qualitative study into the experiences and perspectives of participants in a children and young people’s citizens’ assembly on biodiversity loss, which took place over two weekends in October 2022. Through this research we seek to explore the extent to which children and youth assemblies, created within a children’s rights framework, support children’s participation in deliberative democracy, and their perspectives and experiences of participation within

wider democratic and societal processes. Through our examination of this question, we seek to reflect on how such deliberative processes could serve to facilitate the greater inclusion of children and young people in the EGD, and serve as a contribution towards its goals.

The article begins with a review of the literature relating to the EGD, citizens' assemblies as a method of deliberative democracy, and the emergence of children and young people's assemblies. We outline the research design underpinning the case at hand, before exploring a number of the key findings from the study, through the lens of European societal transformation: firstly, the imperative for children and young people to participate in a just and sustainable societal transformation; secondly, the avenues and frameworks which can support the meaningful and valuable participation of children and young people in deliberative democracy; thirdly, the key action areas proposed by children and young people in the Irish case, as reflected (or ignored) within wider policy; and finally, the citizen actions as undertaken and reflected on by the children and young people, including the individual and collective, the local, national and global. The article concludes with a consideration of how children and young people's informed environmental perspectives can strengthen representation, participation and the pursuit of justice within the EGD and wider environmental governance and decision making.

2. The position and participation of children and young people in the European Green Deal

This section begins with an analysis of the scope and limitations of the EGD, with a particular focus on how children and young people are considered within the broader policy framework. Through a review of literature, the article then considers this diverse group within the context of deliberative mini-publics such as citizens' assemblies, which are recognised as a mechanism through which the EGD can be enacted.

2.1. The scope and limitations of the EGD

The EGD sets out a vision for transforming the EU economy and society, aiming at net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, a decoupling of economic growth from resource use, and ensuring that no person and no place is left behind (Mastini, Kallis, and Hickel 2021; Vela Almeida et al. 2023). Whilst being welcomed by many, questions remain in relation to its progress and also its conceptualisation of broader global relations. Siddi (2020) contends that the performance of the EGD should be evaluated against four categories: remaining a policy priority; financial endowment; legal enforcement; and international cooperation.

The EGD is recognised for prioritising citizens' participation to a greater extent than previous articulations of EU environmental policies (Hadjichambis 2022). However, it is recognised that the participation of citizens within the EGD is significantly circumscribed (see Machin 2025). At its launch, the European Commission referred to the growing public movement around climate action, stating that 'Recent political events show that game-changing policies only work if citizens are fully involved in designing them' (European Commission 2019b). Indeed, that year saw a surge in citizen-led mobilisation for climate action, with large public protests

taking place all over the world. In movements such as Fridays For Future, children and young people played a pivotal role in this global mobilisation, advocating for more ambitious and fairer climate policies (de Moor et al. 2020), alongside wider social movements demanding more inclusive and participatory democracy (see Parks 2025).

The active participation of children is not explicit with the EGD itself, but can be found in parallel EU policy. Article 24 of the EU Charter on Fundamental Freedoms expresses that children 'may express their views freely [and] Such views shall be taken into consideration on matters which concern them in accordance with their age and maturity' (European Union n.d.). The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child (2021) lays out the moral imperative for children (one in five people in the EU, one in three people in the world) to participate in society, and in particular as part of the green transition (European Commission 2021a). The Strategy builds upon efforts to mainstream children's rights across relevant policies creating what is termed a 'child-friendly culture in EU policy-making' (p.23), as well as a broader EU network for children's rights. Furthermore, the Strategy is specific in naming the key actions by which the European Commission will support this development, to:

create space for children to become active participants of the European Climate Pact through pledges or by becoming Pact Ambassadors. By involving schools in sustainable climate, energy and environment education, the Education for Climate Coalition will help children to become agents of change in the implementation of the Climate Pact and the European Green Deal. (European Commission 2021a, 5)

Despite this statement, little information can be found on the modalities the Commission plans to use to fulfil this commitment. The examination by Tosun, Pollex, and Crumbie (2023) of the Climate Pact program outlines two distinct categories based on the eligibility criteria: 'policy professionals' and 'lay volunteers'. They argue that the intricacies of climate policy coupled with the absence of comprehensive training programs for Pact ambassadors may lead those in the 'lay volunteers' category to feel overwhelmed by the expectations set forth by the Commission, potentially hindering their ability to make their intended impact. Considering their age, children and young people are more likely to fall into this group, thus facing barriers to meaningful participation in the program overall.

Additionally, the EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child pursues the active participation of children, with formal education as a key avenue by which this empowerment can be supported. The relationship between formal education and the EGD is recognised in other literature. Zotti (2022) recognises the pivotal role ascribed to education in the promotion of sustainability and the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. He argues that beyond tweaks to existing curricula, the EU has positioned education, and the development of sustainability-focused knowledge, skills and behaviours, at the heart of its European education policy reform. Through a collaborative stakeholder process, Amata Garito et al. (2023) developed a competence framework in the areas of Circular Economy, Clean Energy and Smart Mobility to support learners, including young people, to develop their skills, knowledge and values in relation to sustainability. Vicente et al. (2023) argue that a policy-aligned model of environmental education, focused on circular economy and food

systems, can serve as a vehicle for connecting young people to the EGD and, in doing so, support the development of sustainability-conscious behaviours.

2.2. Participation of children in citizens' assemblies

Citizen participation is a central pillar of the EGD (Torney 2021) which pays particular attention to the role of spaces for deliberative democracy in supporting the policy and the associated Climate Pact. European citizens panels, which are slowly emerging as a feature of the EU policy landscape, have been organised on topics at the heart of the EGD, namely energy efficiency (2024) and food waste (2022–23). Their recruitment, process (information, deliberation, decision) and output mirror those of other deliberative mini-publics such as Citizens' Assemblies. First used in the early 2000s in Canada where they focused on electoral system reform (see Fournier et al. 2011), Citizens' Assemblies have grown worldwide and expanded their remit to include a range of constitutional, institutional and policy issues. They can facilitate the inclusion of views and concerns of those most vulnerable to climate change (Dryzek and Niemeyer 2019; Krznaric 2020; Smith 2021). One of their strengths, it is argued, is the non-election of their members who are, as a consequence, not constrained by electoral cycles in the short-term nor 'disincentivized' from representing the interests of future generations, non-humans, minority groups, and those that are 'unorganised' (MacKenzie 2023, 32). We have witnessed experiments that seek to include the interests of future generations, that is those as yet to be born, and non-humans in deliberations. Futures design experiments in Japan have used deliberative processes to invite members to participate as imaginary future generations in discussions on municipal plans (see Hara et al. 2019; Saijo 2020). Using role play and other imagining/visioning techniques, a citizens' assembly on drinking water in Île de France asked its members (high school students) to participate as non-human entities (Francesca et al. 2024).

Ireland has emerged as a world leader in the use of citizens' assemblies to effect constitutional and policy reform. Between 2012 and 2024, Ireland held five national citizens' assemblies and was the first country to organise a national citizens' assembly that deliberated on climate action (2016–2018). That Assembly also deliberated on Ireland's then-constitutional prohibition on abortion, along with other issues. More recently, a citizens assembly on biodiversity loss (2022) was convened. Research on the Irish citizens' assemblies has shown them to be an effective and impactful means of public deliberation on contentious issues such as abortion and on policy matters such as climate action (Devaney et al. 2020; Farrell et al. 2021). Yet within the Irish citizens' assembly process the eligibility criteria for membership, directly excludes those under the age of 18, a group that will bear the brunt of the ill, and in some cases irreversible, effects of climate change and biodiversity loss (Harris 2021). The same is noted of other citizens' assemblies that have deliberated on climate action and/or biodiversity, the number of which has been expanding rapidly in recent years (Smith 2023). The exclusion of children and young people from citizens' assemblies undermines the institution's legitimacy by weakening two of their core principles, diversity and equality (Harris 2021; Nishiyama 2023). Recognising that children tend not to be invited, by virtue of the eligibility criteria, to be members of such assemblies, there are proposals of other ways in which they can be included. These range from being represented by adults, represented by children, and consultation, all described by Nishiyama as 'second best' (2023:180).

Iceland and Scotland provide contrasting cases of intergenerational deliberation. Iceland's children's assembly (Barnapi), organised by its Office of the Ombudsman for children, and now supported by the Children's Ombudsman Act, was first held in 2019 (Janta et al. 2021). 150 randomly selected children aged between 11 and 15, discussed topics of their choosing (including issues of climate change and biodiversity loss) with the results of deliberations presented to 'ministers, members of parliament and people from institutions, municipalities and the business world' (Hallson 2019). Scotland's Climate Assembly, which took place in 2020–2021 involved children in its process, through a partnership with the Children's Parliament. Over 100 randomly selected children aged 7–14 engaged with a wide range of climate change evidence, presented through creative activities and workshops facilitated remotely due to the COVID-19 restrictions in place at the time (Reid 2023). The children's deliberative journey was captured in a series of short films presented to Scotland's Climate Assembly, who, in their final report to the Scottish Parliament, included all 42 of the children's calls to action alongside their own recommendations for consideration (Scotland's Climate Assembly 2021).

Whilst there is clear evidence of the growing space for the inclusion of children's perspectives within decision-making processes, there is also recognition that many processes which seek to serve this end do not live up to their lofty ideals. Hart (1992) recognises that the inclusion of children and young people may indeed be used as a means by which adults may manipulate young people to espouse particular viewpoints, may use young people as decoration in otherwise undemocratic practices, or gather limited or diluted expressions from young people, in the form of tokenism. On a similar theme, Lundy (2007) argues that in order to have their right to express opinions in matters affecting them, children should be provided with a space to share their perspectives, should have their ideas facilitated accordingly, should be provided with an audience to hear and respond to their demands, and should have the opportunity to influence the world around them. There are several pieces of important research from a diversity of settings which consider the extent to which these factors facilitate or indeed block children's right to express opinions in matters affecting them (e.g. Cook-Sather 2020; Mitra 2018). However, citizens' assemblies have so far not been considered within such analyses.

3. Methodology

In response to the declining condition of species and habitats globally, within Europe and within Ireland itself (European Commission 2019a, 2019c; WWF 2022), the Irish government declared both climate and biodiversity crises in 2019, recognising the urgent need to revise national environmental legislation and policy. The declaration committed to convening a citizens' assembly on the topic of biodiversity, but it took a further three years for it to commence. Charged with 'examining how the State can improve its response to the issue of biodiversity loss', Ireland's Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss deliberated over the course of 5 weekends from May 2022 to January 2023. In parallel, a Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, commissioned and funded by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, met over two weekends in autumn 2022. Considering its inclusion of children and young people, this particular assembly serves as an outlier against the greater population of predominantly

adult citizens' assemblies, yet given the scant number of assemblies focused on children and young people, it also represents a highly significant case, of an emergent phenomena, within the Irish and wider European context.

Over 500 children and young people aged 7–17 years from across Ireland applied to be part of the Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, of which 35 were selected using a process of random stratified sampling (by age, gender identity, geography, urban/rural, ethnicity, and disability) adapted from an approach commonly used in the field of deliberative democracy to create a diverse cross-section of society. The Assembly was designed and implemented by an intergenerational team consisting of 9 Young Advisors aged 8–16 and an independent research consortium consisting of staff from Dublin City University, University College Cork, and terre des hommes. On Earth Day 2023, Saturday 22 April, the Assembly's final report was published. It called for greater respect for rights of children and nature, for biodiversity to be at the centre of decision-making, and for children and young people to be included in the collective response to biodiversity loss (CYPABL, 2023).

This article draws on a research study of the Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss, which involved a series of phased focus groups with participating children and young people. The first phase took place in December 2022, in the two months following the completion of the Assembly, and included two online mixed-age focus groups with all available participants. The second phase took place 12 months after the conclusion of the Assembly and involved three focus groups with a total of 35 participants from the Assembly. Codes for each focus group can be found in Table 1. All participants provided verbal and written assent, with written consent for the children and young people's participation provided by their parents/carers. Ethical approval for this research was granted by the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee (Ref: DCUREC/2022/124).

All group interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and then analysed through a process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) using Nvivo qualitative software. This approach to analysis recognises the relationships and power dynamics between the researchers, as both members of the organising committee of the CYPABL and adults, and the children and young people as assembly members and research participants.

The themes derived from this analysis include: (1) **Effective citizens' assemblies**: the factors which contribute to an effective citizens' assembly; (2) **Education**: The role of education in shaping children and young people's understanding of biodiversity loss and democratic deliberation; (3) **Impact of citizens' assemblies**: the personal, social, political and environmental impact of citizens' assemblies; (4) **Spheres of influence**: the spaces in which children and young people have influenced (or have attempted to influence) others

Table 1. Focus group information - children and young people, immediate/year post.

Code	Details	Age Group	Time
CYP, I1	Children and Young People Focus Group 1 (Immediate Post)	7–9 year old	Dec' 2022
CYP, I2	Children and Young People Focus Group 2 (Immediate Post)	9–13 year old	Dec' 2022
CYP, Y1	Children and Young People Focus Group 1 (Year Post)	13–17 year old	Oct' 2023
CYP, Y2	Children and Young People Focus Group 2 (Year Post)	9–12 year old	Oct' 2023
CYP, Y3	Children and Young People Focus Group 3 (Year Post)	7–8 year old	Oct' 2023

in relation to biodiversity loss and/or children and young people's involvement in democratic processes. This article focuses on aspects of two particular themes, as we present an analysis of the nature of effective citizens' assemblies in the next section, before offering a more in-depth analysis of the spheres of influence, and acts of environmental citizenship unearthed in this study.

4. Effective children and young people's citizens' assemblies

The following section draws on the perspectives and experiences of participants to consider what might constitute an effective citizens' assembly for children and young people. It begins with exploration of the Children and Young People's Assembly on Biodiversity Loss as a space for the meaningful participation of children and young people, before considering demands for wider inclusion. It then explores the deliberative processes underpinning the Assembly, as the basis for informed collective decision making.

4.1. The inclusion of (all) children within decision making processes

Lundy (2007) notes that effective participation requires a designated space for children to share their perspectives and opinions. For some participants, the limited opportunities for children and young people to express their opinions within everyday settings were clear:

Adults just don't want to listen to someone that's younger than them. And they just think that they're more superior because they were on the earth longer and kind of destroyed it while they were there. (CYP, Y1)

Here, the failure to engage with children and young people's views was perceived to be underpinned by negative perceptions of children's capacity to make informed decisions, which are recognised elsewhere (Larkins 2014). For this participant, such a view was deemed doubly problematic, as, from their perspective, biodiversity loss had been caused by adults. Other participants agreed, but added that the Assembly opened up an important space for children and young people's perspectives to be shared and explored:

We're not really listened to, but here we were, here we were giving our opinions, here we were given a space to actually voice what we think and what we want to see happen, which was really important because it's the only way forward if we want to see solutions. If children and young people aren't going to be part of their own future, how can we possibly solve this? (CYP, Y2)

These perspectives reiterate both the importance of citizens' assemblies as spaces to support children and young people's democratic participation, as an 'opportunity for involvement' (Lundy 2007, 933), potentially within broader frameworks such as the EGD, in contrast to exclusion from democratic spaces elsewhere. However, they also explain this participation as a matter of justice: children and young people recognise the damage that biodiversity loss will do to their childhoods, their futures lives and livelihoods, and the world they live and will continue to live in. As such, they have a political right to be included in the decision-making processes which determine how biodiversity loss and

climate change are addressed, and which should form a dimension of an inclusive just transition.

Analysis of the focus groups revealed that children and young people had different pathways to becoming participants, including those who made independent applications, those who discussed applications with parents/carers, and in some cases those whose parents/carers made applications, informing their child when their selection had been confirmed. Importantly, there was a recognition from participants that opportunity to participate needed to be extended, as one participant described, in order to provide ‘more opportunities like the assembly for other people as well. Not just us.’ (CYP, Y1). Hadjichambis (2022) notes that a just and inclusive process is required for a green transition. Children and young people’s citizens’ assemblies can provide an important space for children and young people’s participation, and serve as important participatory spaces to advance the EGD, but the 35 children selected represent a small percentage of the 510 interested applicants, a fraction of the 1,225,738 living in Ireland (Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth 2024), and of those 81 million children in the EU (UNICEF 2024). There is clearly a need to deepen the representation of children and young people within broader democratic systems, and to widen both the opportunities for participation, whilst supporting coherence between such participatory spaces on a national and European level.

4.2. A deliberative process for informed collective decision making

Lundy (2007) argues that children should be able to express their views freely, but recognises that, in some cases, children may need support to explore and form views. A group of nine young advisors were involved in the design and delivery of the Assembly, which followed a framework of learning, deliberation, development of calls to action, mirroring practices within existing adult processes. One of the young advisors discussed the extent to which the collaboration with the independent research team had supported the development of this space:

I was just going to say about the collaborative experience of the assembly that I think as a youth advisor, it was really positive to have that experience because we were able to help plan what the assemblies were going to be about ... I think it made the whole atmosphere kind of very friendly for the young people and open, which was really encouraging. And it was really positive to experience your ideas being put into action and seeing it come to life. (CYP, Y2)

The participatory approach to the design of the Assembly was perceived by participants to support both the development of learning in relation to biodiversity and biodiversity loss, but also informed decision making:

Before we want to share our opinion, it’s really important to learn as much as we can and get educated. And this assembly was, I think, really well able to start that process in a really positive way. (CYP, Y2)

It was like we were creating the workshop as we did it, because it was all about our opinions and our ideas and our solutions to problems that we haven’t really found a way to solve yet. But it was everything put together as it came, because it was the young people’s ideas and the young people’s thoughts and opinions and feelings about the matters. (CYP, Y2)

There was also a recognition from participants that the Assembly's approaches to catering for participants from 7 to 17 years was a positive element of participation:

It wasn't just older children, older young people with such young children as well, which is important for sharing information. And it was really well adapted to including everybody. And older children were getting more information, but the younger children were still able to follow along. So that was really positive. (CYP, Y2)

For younger participants, the importance of a fun approach was noted:

In the Assembly, they take things that would that like would usually be boring, like to learn about and make it like really fun to learn about and make like. And it's easy to make new friends in it and they just make it really fun to learn. (CYP, Y3)

Elsewhere, there was recognition of the importance of providing participants with multi-mediums through which to share opinions and perspectives:

Some people who are shy, they write in their emotions really well on paper. And I'd say like, I was doing a zoom call and like, it was about someone writing a song, and there were some people who were too shy to speak out and but they wrote, like, really good ideas that went into the song. And so I think it's very good that like, some people got to write in their answers or like, say it privately and it's still gotten to the calls to action. So yeah, I'd say that's most people got to listen to anyone who wanted to, anyone who spoke out was listened to.

Although there is significant focus placed on the development of individual knowledge, skills and values within a sustainable transition, many of the children's responses recognised the importance of the collective in the learning process, in problem solving, and in decision making:

I felt like we were all like a big family, and we were all together, and we were all, like, bouncing off each other in a way that we were learning from each other, and we were learning new stuff. And then we were also given that voice and that ... to put our opinions out into the space where we can consider this. And we could go, yeah, this is a really good idea. And like, what can we do about this? ... I kind of feel like it was a family that we were all together and we were all doing something that we cared about and loved. (CYP, Y2)

Whilst the care for nature amongst Assembly members which this participant describes could be expected considering the sampling process underpinning the Assembly, this insight also suggests as to how the collective learning process has underpinned children's and young people's expression of opinion and the pursuit of citizen action.

5. Spheres of influence and critical acts of citizenship

Through the Assembly, participants developed a series of 58 calls to action, organised under 7 themes: waste and consumption, governance, energy and transport, restoring and rewilding, habitat a species protection, overexploitation, and education (CYPABL 2023). When mapped against the EGD key actions, certain similarities of focus can be noted, including in the areas of energy, mobility, and preserving and protecting biodiversity. Both climate change and pollution were incorporated within the Assembly as cross cutting themes (in light of their recognition as drivers of biodiversity loss), and agriculture featured with the finer details of Assembly calls to action (e.g. education for

farmers). Detailed calls to action related to biodiversity loss are unsurprisingly dominant given the focus of the Assembly.

Machin and Tan (2024) emphasise the importance of ‘critical acts of citizenship’ undertaken by citizens in response to the challenges of climate change and biodiversity loss. Considering such acts of citizenship for young people, Larkins (2014, 7) argues that children may ‘transgress the boundaries of existing balances of rights, responsibilities and statuses, through their (mis)behaviour’. The analysis of focus groups conducted both immediately and one-year post-Assembly revealed multiple critical acts of citizenship undertaken by Assembly members. These acts take place in multiple contexts, and in what we define as diverse spheres of influence. In these spaces, the children and young people involved in the Assembly have, with varying degrees of self-reported success, taken action to address the drivers of biodiversity loss, to raise awareness of biodiversity loss, and to widen opportunities for children and young people’s participation within deliberative forms of democracy.

5.1. Biodiversity dialogue action within families and friendship groups

Particularly for younger members of the Assembly, acts of citizenship were centred on their immediate localities and in particular, their homes, families and friends:

I gave the gardening book [part of a gift pack given to Assembly participants as compensation for their participation] to my grandparents because, like, she, she loves gardening, and she wanted to figure out a better way to, like, a more sustainable way to make her garden look better. (CYP, I2)

So I’m not giving up hope in my own home. We’ve always been pretty good with protecting biodiversity. We have a lot of land, a lot of farm. So we’re good at protecting that. I sometimes forget that that isn’t like that everywhere. (CYP, Y2)

Other participants shared their post-Assembly experiences of protest in relation to biodiversity loss:

Well, I, kind of, I went outside of my house one time, and I put out a sign to say ‘Save Our Planet’. So I kind of protested a bit, but then also I told my school about it, and I brought in our big poster that has all our laws and stuff. (CYP, Y3)

Although children’s involvement in political protest has become a more widely recognised phenomenon as a result of the school climate strikes, a varied response to their participation in this democratic action is noted (Barrance 2020). However, Daly (2013) reminds us that, despite the threats to safety they may face, children’s right to protest should be protected and, where possible, facilitated.

5.2. Raising awareness within school

The focus groups with the children and young people who participated in the Assembly revealed the extent to which educational experiences had influenced their varied understanding of biodiversity loss. The children and young people placed emphasis on the importance of schools as places where biodiversity loss could be understood, but also

recognised the short fallings in existing educational provision. Indeed, the European Green Deal states:

Schools, training institutions and universities are well placed to engage with pupils, parents, and the wider community on the changes needed for a successful transition. (European Commission 2019b, 19)

Children and young people in this research also recognised schools as important spaces for children to communicate their understandings and experiences of biodiversity loss, which had been developed through their participation in the Assembly:

This is in relation to the Assembly. After both of our Assemblies and the adult Citizens' Assembly took place, I was really lucky to be able to speak in front of my school and my peers and spread the knowledge that was given here to educate more people on the work that we did and the whole process of this Assembly. (CYP, Y1)

Others described taking more informal paths to raise awareness and plan actions to address biodiversity loss:

So in school, uh, I gather around with my friends and, um, we said that we were going to think of how to stop the environment to be polluted and stuff like that. So at the end of the year, we'd take some of the ideas and then tell them to the people on the yard. (CYP, Y3)

5.3. Exercising political power in local communities

For several young people, the spheres of influence in which they undertook acts of citizenship included their local communities:

I've been trying to get my village to make a micro-forest because it's just a small forest with four metres and ... there's the back of the school. It's the perfect spot for it. They haven't gotten back to me. (CYP, Y2)

I kind of went to the leader of the Tidy Towns that were there. Yeah. And I told them about this [weedkiller] and how it can actually damage someone's lungs and can also, it's not just for the biodiversity. It's also for us. (CYP, Y2)

Whilst advocating for the planting of a micro-forest (small, fast-growing forests) remained work in progress for one participant, the importance of pursuing opportunities for the rewilding of local spaces, and a reversal of land use approaches which have contributed to biodiversity loss was clearly evident. Similarly, the use of pesticides is recognised as highly polluting and detrimental to biodiversity. A participant's engagement with the local community-group leader was seen as a valuable route to addressing this issue. A number of participants recognised that despite the strength of their calls to action and the perceived importance of raising awareness in their schools and local communities, some people may not be receptive:

Well, it depends ... who we're talking about because some people believe all of our calls to action are important while other people just think we're a bunch of kids that think we can do an adult job. So, like, basically all of them [the Assembly's calls to action] are important, but some people just see it from a different view and don't see it that way. (CYP, Y3)

Again, children and young people recognised that, in light of their age, adults may choose to disregard their calls to action, but also people may hold different views in conflict with Assembly calls.

5.4. The inclusion of young people's perspectives in decision making across scales

The Assembly calls to action in relation to governance demanded that 'every decision being made must consider biodiversity and the rights of nature' (CYPABL, 2023, 33). This decision was reinforced by participants throughout the focus group interviews, as they explained where this inclusion should take place:

I really want biodiversity loss and matters like that to be at the forefront of all our decisions within our lives, within governments, lives, within the government's decisions. And yeah, I just want it to be like basically at the forefront of all of our decisions that we make so that we're aware and that we can make decisions that benefit biodiversity. (CYP, Y2)

The views of children and young people participating in the Assembly have been included within important governmental processes. In addition to informing the work of the national Citizens' Assembly on Biodiversity Loss for adults, the calls to action were incorporated in the Government of Ireland's National Biodiversity Action Plan 2023–2030, with Tánasite Micheál Martin noting that 'There are a multitude of reasons to value, conserve, restore and sustainably use biodiversity in Ireland. But the simple fact that our children want us to is the only reason we need' (Government of Ireland 2022, 3; 2023). However, both Lundy (2007) and Hart (1992) caution against decorative or tokenistic approaches to children's participation, and indeed, whilst certain impacts of the Assembly may be considered a success, the devastation of the biodiversity crisis demands meaningful, longstanding governmental action and young people's participation will not serve as a panacea to a complex global challenge. This hesitance was reflected by participants in the research, with one young person noting:

I think the recommendations were listened to more than usual. But I'm not sure if in government they've been acted on yet, but I think they have been put in place to be acted upon. (CYP, Y2)

For one of the members of the Assembly, their sphere of influence has extended to Europe:

I also had the opportunity to go to the European Youth event in Strasbourg, which was amazing. So it was two days, three days of young people in the European Parliament. And I went to lots of the biodiversity loss talks and met some of the ministers who were the next, the following week in June, creating the, or passing the, Nature Restoration Law, which was really interesting because I listened to them speak and talk to them about that, which was really positive experience. (CYP, Y2)

This direct engagement with European democratic processes related to biodiversity represented the important development of a broader sphere of influence which is often distant from children and young people's local-lived experiences. Attempts to extend the remit of citizens' assemblies to a European level have been put forward (Abels et al. 2022), and this opens up avenues for extending the scope of children and young people's

assemblies. However, it should be noted that children's disconnection from European citizenship, and thus European Green citizenship, as proposed by Machin and Tan (2024), remains an ongoing challenge, and a significant barrier to the advancement of the EGD

The EGD makes explicit that the responses to biodiversity loss cannot be confined to national or indeed European borders:

The environmental ambition of the Green Deal will not be achieved by Europe acting alone. The drivers of climate change and biodiversity loss are global and are not limited by national borders. (European Commission 2019b)

Several Assembly members presented global aspirations and hopes in the face of biodiversity loss:

I want other governments and other people in other countries who might not have the opportunity that we got to learn about biodiversity, to know and about the effects of it so that they can have something similar in their country, because we're all in this together. (CYP, Y2)

However, other participants went beyond this, to demand children's participation as a matter of justice:

We need more stuff like this. It needs to be a global movement. It can't just happen in one country. For real global change to happen, this needs to be everywhere. This needs to be every child's rights upheld. Not just that in Ireland it's all great that it's here, but it needs to be everywhere else as well, because there are some regions that are much more affected than ours. (CYP, Y2)

These ideals expressed by this participant reflect a broader cosmopolitan worldview which not only recognises the imperative to uphold children's rights globally, including their protection from the human consequences of biodiversity loss, but their political rights to participate in the decision making, which can reduce and reverse the drivers of biodiversity loss. Furthermore, this view also recognises the global injustices underpinning the disproportionate impact of climate change and biodiversity loss to children and other people in the global south. The 'global movement' which this participant describes might represent an example of the thinking which can demand policies with what Vela Almeida (2023) describes as a grassroots emancipatory potential.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This article sought to explore if and how children and youth assemblies might facilitate children's participation in deliberative democracy, and their inclusion within wider democratic processes, particularly those concerning environmental issues, such as those framed within the EGD. In short, this article argues that indeed, children and youth assemblies can support children's participation in local and national democratic processes, and when drawing on children and young people's individual and collective expertise and creativity, can serve to support wider processes such as the EGD and offer a contribution to a just, sustainable and inclusive transition. To deepen this conclusion, we will consider why this should happen, how it might happen, and what children and young people's perspectives and experiences might tell us about broader challenges for the EGD.

Firstly, we recognise that the European Commission's EGD Communication of 2019 was largely silent on the role of children and young people despite the importance of young people's involvement in the climate strikes. Whilst children and young people continue to be marginalized in broader societal decision making, their inclusion must be prioritised, including within the framework and processes of the European Green Deal. However, there remains a need to ensure that children and young people's assemblies, and all spaces for deliberative democracy, are inclusive to those children and groups of children traditionally excluded from decision making.

Secondly, children and young people's assemblies offer an innovative means by which children and young people can be granted a more formal means of participation than currently exists in most contexts, and in doing so provide an important counter to the exclusion from democratic spaces that young people experience. Citizens' assemblies represent one strand of a broader framework of actions which seeks to support the sustainable transformation of European societies as espoused by the EGD. The need for the embedding children's participation mechanisms at EU level across different policy areas is recognised (European Commission 2021b) and this article contends that national and European networks of children's assemblies could work in tandem with existing citizen structures, and support the EGD's commitment to the wider participation and deeper engagement of European citizens. As Parks (2025) recognises, there remain questions as to whether citizen's assemblies as conceptualised in the EGD meet the more transformative aims as imagined through social movements. For children's and young people's assemblies, it is imperative that children and young people themselves take a central position in the design and facilitation of these democratic spaces to ensure the principles of inclusion, the representative power of their political voices and their valuable creativity can meaningfully underpin the EGD, and strengthen policy alignment with democratic principles and the demands of a just transition.

Thirdly, we have considered and reflected on the acts of environmental citizenship undertaken by children and young people at the heart of this study. As they move beyond the boundaries of accepted societal roles (Larkins 2014), children and young people live out their citizenship in multiple spheres of influence, whilst recognising not all adults view their participation positively. Nonetheless, these experiences and reflections define two key challenges for European environmental citizenship and the EGD itself: firstly, to make connections between the local, national and European acts of citizenship, as described by the participants, which seek to transform homes, schools and local communities; and secondly, to make connections to the broader global biodiversity crisis, and the frameworks of global and intergenerational justice which can support the movements required for the sustainable transformation of national, European and global societies.

Finally, the article argues for the centrality of children's rights within the processes which seek to govern a just transition. Incorporating a rights-based approach to children and young people's participation in environmental decision making offers both a theoretical and legal framework with direct connections to European and national policies, and wider children rights commitments such as the General Comment No. 26 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child. As well as being supported by the wider rights frameworks that run parallel to the EGD, a rights-based approach facilitates the voice of children of all ages (Lundy 2007), and as such these spaces can support children

to make informed decisions about complex issues, such as biodiversity loss, and take action to support tackling these global challenges.

The EU Strategy on the Rights of the Child is communicated to young people through a plan for children's rights (European Commission 2021a) which lists three of the most important aspects: that all children have a say; that children are safe; and that all children in the world can enjoy their rights. The European Green Deal provides a roadmap towards a fair and sustainable European society, where young people are safe and experience the fulfillment of their rights. Their right to have a say must be enshrined in this imagined society and within the processes which guide our journey there.

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