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Deliberative approaches to the climate crisis: Adapting Climathons for rural communities

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Abstract

This paper reflects on adapting the Climathon method as a novel deliberative approach for place-based climate governance, with a focus on agri-food climate solutions. We consider the interrelated governance concepts of deliberative democracy and just transitions, with attention to liberal and agonistic perspectives. The paper draws on two Climathons organised in rural English communities in early 2022: one in Cumbria and one in Cornwall. It uses semi-structured interviews, evaluative data and researcher reflections to analyse alignment (or not) with components of deliberative discussion, principles of deliberative democracy, and factors that increase perceptions of procedural justice. We found it was possible to create conditions for conscientious and informed deliberation. However, some aspects of the Climathon methodology made deliberation challenging, particularly the ‘balanced’ component, as time pressure led to a focus on achieving consensus rather than exploring all arguments. Climathons can be a valuable deliberative tool, as part of a range of options including citizens’ assemblies. We recommend co-designing events with local stakeholders, aligning with existing local initiatives, and mapping a clear pathway for solutions to feed into policy and practice.

KEYWORDS

Climathon, deliberative democracy, just transition, procedural justice, rural communities, United Kingdom

1 | INTRODUCTION

This paper reflects on adapting the Climathon methodology as a novel deliberative approach for rural place-based climate governance, focusing on agri-food climate solutions. The declaration of ‘climate emergencies’ by numerous governments has raised questions around the potential for increased authoritarianism (Hulme, 2019). However, there have also

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been calls for ‘more, and better, democracy’ to address the climate crisis (Willis, 2020). Here, the ‘deliberative wave’ of interventions (OECD, 2020; Willis et al., 2022) has crested alongside increasing attention to the concept of a ‘just transition’, which means decarbonising while simultaneously reducing inequality (McCauley & Heffron, 2018).

1.1 | Deliberative democracy

Deliberative democracy and just transitions draw theoretically from the same soil, including late twenty-first century works by Rawls and Habermas (Habermas, 1996; Rawls, 1993). Both philosophers are broadly considered to advance a liberal view of deliberative democracy, in which citizens are assumed to be rational actors who ‘transcend’ their personal viewpoints to develop arguments that might be acceptable to their fellow citizens (Forst, 2001). While ethics may be up for deliberation, questions of justice (and therefore morals) are presumed to be based on pre-existing principles. This liberal view of justice has been critiqued for failing to acknowledge systemic injustices which may require reparative approaches (Young, 1990), and for being both patriarchal and racialised (Mills, 2017).

Furthermore, Mouffe (1999) has argued that by focusing on consensus, liberal deliberative democracy overlooks the beneficial role of disagreement. She presents ‘agonistic pluralism’ as an alternative, arguing that political actors holding different views should position themselves as adversaries, maintaining a common commitment to the value of democracy (Mouffe, 1999), yet understanding that democratic institutions are themselves open to reimagining and reconstitution (Machin, 2019). Meanwhile, Rostbøll (2008) has argued that Rawls’ approach to deliberative democracy prioritises ‘accommodation’ of others’ viewpoints, and is excessively focused on negative freedom, that is, freedom from state interference. Meanwhile, earlier work by Habermas acknowledged an emancipatory role for deliberation, which allows collective learning and greater ‘internal autonomy’ (Habermas, 1992; Rostbøll, 2008). The idea of deliberative democracy allowing intersubjective learning is evident in Fishkin and Luskin’s (2005) work on ‘deliberative polling’, which led to participants becoming more informed and sometimes changing their views. From a climate perspective, scholars have argued that deliberative processes can enhance societal support for challenging policy decisions by bringing the ideas and experiences of citizens more directly into policymaking, thus enhancing the legitimacy of resulting pathways (Goodin & Dryzek, 2016).

The more recent ‘deliberative wave’ (OECD, 2020) has seen a proliferation of deliberative processes, often with an emphasis on consensus and generating concrete recommendations (Machin, 2023; Oliver et al., 2023; Willis et al., 2022). The most well studied approach is the citizens’ assembly (CA) (Elstub et al., 2021), a form of ‘deliberative mini-public’ (Curato et al., 2021) often commissioned by policymakers at different scales, with predefined expectations as to how their outputs will be used. CAs have been critiqued for their focus on consensus, which may overlook the transformative potential of disagreement (Machin, 2023).

1.2 | Just transitions

Another related governance concept receiving increased attention in recent years is that of a just transition. Having emerged in relation to energy transitions away from oil and gas, this approach is increasingly being applied to agri-food (Reay, 2020), with particular relevance for rural areas. For example, evidence shows that areas specialised in livestock farming are likely to face significant losses to livelihoods if the general population shifts to a more sustainable diet (Rieger et al., 2023). There is therefore a risk of distributive injustice emerging from climate policies. More generally, the need for rural nature-based solutions to achieve carbon sequestration echoes longstanding conceptualisations of the rural as a ‘dumping ground’ for urban excess (Hommes et al., 2019). Rural communities also face specific decarbonisation challenges, such as higher car dependency and inadequate grid connections to support new energy projects, yet may be underrepresented in climate policymaking.

Just transitions incorporate various forms of justice: the most relevant for this paper being procedural justice (PJ), which asks whether decisions are made fairly (Brandstedt & Brülde, 2019), and people are included in decisions that affect them. PJ can be enacted at different scales, and governance structures need to attend to which voices ‘matter’ when democratically balancing local decisions with national strategies (Walker et al., 2023). There are various models for how perceptions of PJ can be increased. For example, the group value model of PJ considers neutrality (that an individual is treated without bias), trust (decisionmakers use unbiased procedures), and standing (respect from group authorities) (Konovsky, 2000; Tyler, 1989). Increasing these components increases social status and self-worth, which positively

impact group members' assessment of PJ. Similarly, voice (the opportunity to speak and be heard) is another component that often positively impacts assessments of PJ (Lind et al., 1990). Overall, higher levels of PJ can mitigate the negative effects of severe procedure outcomes—the more severe the outcome, the more important the role of PJ in influencing overall perceptions of the event (Konovsky, 2000).

These components of PJ are aligned with proposed components of deliberative democracy. Fishkin and Luskin (2005), for example, posit five components of deliberative discussion: informed, balanced, conscientious, substantive and comprehensive (Table 1). We later utilise these components as heuristics for our empirical analysis of the Climathon methodology.

1.3 | The Climathon methodology

Climathon, a portmanteau of 'climate' and 'marathon', is inspired by the hackathon movement. In contrast to a CA, a hackathon is a more time-constrained event (typically 24–48 hours) where teams work on a specific problem (Lodato & DiSalvo, 2016). Design thinking principles are often involved (Brown & Wyatt, 2010), and events often culminate in a presentation by each team, sometimes to a panel of judges (Lodato & DiSalvo, 2016).

A critique of hackathons is that events can often fail to deliver completed projects, so they are not conducive to longer term impact. However, scholars researching civic hackathons argue these events constitute a form of deliberative democracy, given their potential to increase civic engagement (Turkel et al., 2019). Having participated in several 'issue-oriented hackathons', Lodato and DiSalvo (2016) argue that hackathons are sites of material participation, in which 'proto publics' are created as teams to negotiate the boundaries of an issue. The main benefit of these events is therefore to contribute to our social imaginaries (Lodato & DiSalvo, 2016), a position aligned with Rostbøll's 'emancipatory' reading of Habermas (Rostbøll, 2008).

Research specifically on Climathons has shown that they can help identify areas of confusion over responsibility for climate action, allow participants to renegotiate their perspectives on the challenges being discussed (Kvamsås et al., 2021), and help to demystify climate-related transitions (Mee et al., 2021). The fact Climathons are 'action-led' can make them more engaging, matching the sense of urgency citizens feel about the climate crisis (Mee et al., 2021). Furthermore, their city scale may help to localise climate change solutions. However, a potential critique is that Climathons may prioritise technical solutions, partly due to their short timescale and focus on involving private sector actors (EIT Climate-KIC, 2022).

Climathons are not well studied, yet have been implemented in hundreds of cities globally, seeking solutions to local climate issues such as plastic pollution, waste disposal, transport, and urban food networks (EIT Climate-KIC, 2023b). This place-based approach to climate governance adds a spatial component and increased local ownership to an otherwise centralised net zero agenda (Mazeaud et al., 2022). However, a knowledge gap exists in understanding how Climathons might be optimised in rural settings, as well as greater understanding of their justice implications using empirical data that include organisers' perspectives.

TABLE 1 Components of deliberative discussion and perceptions of procedural justice (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005; Konovsky, 2000; Lind et al., 1990; Tyler, 1989).

Components of deliberative discussion	Factors that enhance perception of PJ
Informed: Arguments should be supported by appropriate and reasonably accurate factual claims	Neutrality: Individuals are treated without bias
Balanced: Arguments should be met by contrary arguments	Trust: Decisionmakers use unbiased procedures
Conscientious: The participants should be willing to talk and listen, with civility and respect	Standing: Respect from group authorities
Substantive: Arguments should be considered sincerely on their merits, not how they are made or who is making them	Voice: The opportunity to speak and be heard
Comprehensive: All points of view held by significant portions of the population should receive attention	

In this paper, we draw on empirical evidence from a project which involved adapting the Climathon methodology (based on the 2022 Climathon playbook) with two rural livestock-farming communities in the UK. By incorporating organiser and participants' perspectives, we seek to contribute new knowledge to literature on issue-oriented hackathons, as well as considering the Climathon methodology's potential as both a deliberative democratic tool and means to enhance perceptions of PJ. This paper is therefore widely relevant for researchers and practitioners working on sustainable rural transitions, and aims to address the following question: does the Climathon methodology have potential to increase deliberative democracy and procedural justice?

2 | TWO RURAL CLIMATHONS AND ASSOCIATED METHODS

We organised two Climathons focused on net zero in food and farming in May 2022. We selected two rural English counties with a high proportion of land used for livestock farming, given these communities are often centred in debates about mitigation of agricultural emissions. We approached existing contacts in each county and were introduced to relevant local stakeholders, leading us to pragmatically focus on two specific regions. In both cases, we partnered with a local or county-level climate network.

In Cumbria, we focused on the Eden Valley, as this has higher quality agricultural land used for more intensive livestock production. Furthermore, the timing of the event (dictated by our funding schedule) fell during lambing season in the upland regions, therefore farmers from those areas were unlikely to attend. In Cornwall, we focused on the Bude area because it faces significant challenges from sea-level rise and our stakeholder partners wished to address a disconnect between town dwellers and the local farming community.

During the Climathons, we carried out non-participant observation, made audio recordings of presentations by participants, and conducted a semi-structured interview with each team during the idea development phase. After each event, we conducted a semi-structured reflexive discussion among the research team, starting from what had gone well and what could be improved. Furthermore, participants completed feedback forms comprising a mix of quantitative data and short answers.

After audio transcription, data were imported to NVivo 12 where we conducted a thematic analysis. This combined an initial inductive phase to identify key themes, followed by a deductive phase using the components in [Table 1](#) (Konovsky, 2000; Lind et al., 1990; Tyler, 1989) as heuristic tools (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Early themes included 'Developing the methodology', 'Engaging farmers', 'Enjoyment of experiential components', and 'Tension with the Climathon methodology'. We used our findings to develop a 'Rural Climathon Playbook', which detailed the major adaptations.

3 | FINDINGS: ADAPTING AND ANALYSING THE CLIMATHON METHODOLOGY

In this section, we will describe the Climathon events and participant attributes, before presenting and analysing our adaptations to the 'Climathon Playbook' (EIT Climate-KIC, 2023a).

3.1 | Events and participants

We designed the Climathon events in collaboration with local partners to facilitate inclusion of a range of stakeholders, including farmers. The events comprised a one-day in-person participatory event, preceded by a lunchtime webinar the day before. This is relatively short for a Climathon, but our partners advocated that anything longer may discourage potential participants. Eden Valley Climathon was held on a local farm, and we were strongly encouraged by stakeholder partners to include a farm walk in the schedule. Bude Climathon was held in a hotel function room, with a walk to visit local food businesses.

The 'informed' component of deliberation states that arguments should be supported by appropriate and reasonably accurate factual claims (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). We adapted the Climathon timescale to feature a lunchtime webinar the day before the in-person event, which involved evidence-based presentations and scene setting from local experts. This helped to frame the events as being based on scientific research, interpreted for local needs. During the in-person

session at Eden Valley, one of the ‘ground rules’ generated by participants was ‘No question is too silly’, signalling an inclusive ethos in which participants sought to ensure they all understood technical aspects.

In terms of recruitment, we invited participants directly when we had been introduced by local partners, and we advertised through Twitter posts and local newspaper articles. Both events attracted a range of food, farming and environmental stakeholders, including people from local climate networks, representatives from farmer organisations, staff from the local councils, retailer representatives, and local citizens with an interest in climate and land use. In the Eden Valley, we attracted 25 participants, of whom several were smallholders and two were or had been full-time farmers. In Bude, there were eight participants, of whom one was a smallholder alongside working with farmers in their full-time job. The lower attendance in Bude was likely multifactorial. Firstly, it took longer for us to identify stakeholder partners, so there was less time for consortium building and promotional activities. Secondly, the event was held in the town, which may have exacerbated the existing disconnect between town-dwellers and the farming community.

Most Climathon participants were white, middle class, and a large proportion were over 40, with each event attracting a mixed gender cohort. The majority of participants lived locally and were already engaged in local climate networks, with an existing understanding of the area and current initiatives. In the Eden Valley, 18/19 survey respondents said they had enjoyed the event ‘a lot’, while 19/19 said they would be interested in participating in similar future events. In Bude, these figures were 5/7 and 7/7, respectively.

3.2 | Consortium building

The initial phase of each Climathon involved understanding local climate networks and developing relationships with local stakeholders. This required a greater amount of time and energy than we had experienced in previous participatory projects, possibly due to the novelty of the methodology and the sensitivity of the topic. For example, a local partner informed us that one of the local climate networks involved some ‘uneasy partnerships’ between farming representatives and climate change organisations, and we therefore had to ensure we gave each group equal time to limit the risk of perceived bias and enhance ‘neutrality’ (Konovsky, 2000; Tyler, 1989).

In comprehensive deliberation, all points of view held by significant portions of the population receive attention (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). Participants tended to feel there were a broad range of opinions represented:

...quite often you go to these things, you end up sitting with the same people, who you usually knew before you went anyway. But I've met lots of different people. I think that expands what you're thinking, because you tend to sit with people, you know, who have similar thoughts. So I think it's good to push you, and challenge you.

Participant, Eden Valley

The events therefore facilitated intersubjective learning and fostered deeper engagement with local climate organisations and networks.

We were made aware it would be very challenging to attract full-time farmers due to misalignment between our timeline and the farming calendar. Furthermore, farmers often feel they are heavily criticised in climate discourses (Simmonds et al., 2024), and therefore may be wary of attending events focused on climate. To mitigate the risk of limited engagement, we incorporated an adapted digital storytelling approach (Gardner, 2023), which ensured that farmers had a voice at the events themselves (Lind et al., 1990), even if few could attend in person. We also incorporated an experiential component to the in-person schedule, with two hours of walks and site visits post-lunch, on advice that this would be more appealing to the farming community. This format was highly valued by all participants:

I tell you what was useful is walking around a real landscape. You know, because if you're looking at farmed landscape ... it's nice to be shown around the farm by the farmer himself. I think it's quite a brave thing to do.

Participant, Eden Valley

Furthermore, one of our Eden Valley partners said they felt that getting non-farming stakeholders onto a farm had helped those people better understand farmers' needs in relation to net zero solutions. Thus, the views of farmers were incorporated using creative and experiential approaches to enhance the ‘comprehensive’ component of deliberation.

Given the relatively small number of participants in a Climathon, these strategies could help give voice to a broader range of social groups.

3.3 | Alignment with local initiatives

We liaised with stakeholder partners to avoid duplicating pre-existing initiatives. This helped increase ‘standing’ in relation to PJ (Konovsky, 2000; Tyler, 1989), by demonstrating respect for local solutions and seeking to add value. Upon follow-up, partners from both areas reported that insights from the Climathons fed into ongoing projects and major funding bids. In Eden Valley, the interest in composting farmyard manure led to a farmer cluster arranging a training session on the technology. However, our project timeline was not conducive to extensive integration with local authority strategy.

3.4 | Streamlined structure

As mentioned previously, we streamlined the Climathon approach to deliver the in-person segment over one working day. This likely helped facilitate greater inclusion than the more traditional 24-hour hackathon timeline. However, the resulting fast-paced nature meant that some participants felt rushed:

Participant 1: Yeah, it did feel that we sort of went from brainstorming to trying to have sort of some quite specific ideas quite quickly.

Participant 2: We had to make choices very quickly. Almost too quickly.

Participant 1: Without, I guess, much decision or exploration.

Participant 2: Or time to think, even. Participants, Bude

This issue potentially limited ‘balanced’ deliberation, in which arguments are met by contrary arguments (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). Time pressure was one of the major tensions with the Climathon methodology among our participants:

I think there wasn't enough time for discussion. We had some discussions outside, I felt we got sort of closed off a bit by trying to move on to the next thing.

Participant, Eden Valley

Climathons offer scope for ‘balanced’ deliberation, as participants often formed teams with people who shared similar ideas, and there was time for inter-team critique. However, the timescale introduced pressure to build intra-team consensus. From an agonistic perspective, this approach may have limited the potential for more creative or radical solutions to emerge (Machin, 2019). As the participant quoted above noted, we cut short one debate during a walk for time reasons and to maintain participants’ ground rules, which included ‘looking for common ground’. There was therefore a rationalistic theme to the events, which prioritised accommodating others’ views over agonism.

3.5 | Collaborative culture

Conscientious deliberation happens when participants are willing to talk and listen, with civility and respect (Fishkin & Luskin, 2005). To promote this, we firstly removed the competitive element of the Climathon model. Rather than presenting to a panel with a winner being chosen, participants presented their solutions to their peers, leading to a greater focus on listening and providing constructive feedback. Participants tended to prefer this more informal model:

Participant 1: I don't like standing up and talking in front of people.

Participant 2: Well I don't, I don't. You'll get more out of people when it's more relaxed.

We also scheduled a ‘ground rules’ session early in the day, in which participants generated rules to promote conscientious engagement. Both Climathons featured a ground rule about being respectful, while others included ‘Agree to

differ' (Eden Valley) and 'Be a good listener' (Bude). Participants therefore recognised the potential for conflict and chose to prioritise consensus over agony.

4 | DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To the authors' knowledge, this is the first piece of research analysing the Climathon methodology as a novel deliberative approach for rural place-based climate governance. Overall, we found that Climathons can create a valuable space for dialogue on contentious topics, and serve to enhance local networks and partnerships. We also found that the Climathon methodology can create conditions for conscientious and informed deliberation, as well as enhancing factors that increase perception of PJ. The time pressure of the Climathon methodology was not conducive to the 'balanced' component of deliberation, instead promoting accommodation over exploring all arguments. We enhanced the 'comprehensive' component of deliberation using digital storytelling and experiential approaches. Climathons offer an agile and action-led approach (Mee et al., 2021), which could complement the use of CAs and other deliberative processes. However, strong attention to agenda-setting, event structure, group dynamics, and follow-up are vital (Devaney et al., 2020). The greater focus on engaging private sector partners also requires caution to avoid excessive corporate control of Climathon agendas.

Lodato and DiSalvo (2016) argue that the most important outcome of civic hackathons is not prototypes, but material participation:

Thus, more than making products or services or solutions, as modes of speculative material participation what these events do is contribute to our social imaginaries.

(Lodato & DiSalvo, 2016)

In our events, the main benefits for participants included networking and the deepening of engagement, plus an imagining of different solutions, how these might work, and what challenges might arise. The imaginative aspect was enhanced via collective walks and site visits, which participants found offered them a more emplaced, experiential understanding of net zero solutions. This speaks to a Habermasian approach to deliberation in which views and identities are formed intersubjectively (Habermas, 1996), and somewhat balances the deliberative shortcomings created by time pressure.

The tension we found between the urgency of the climate crisis and the need for care-ful approaches that prioritise democracy and inclusion is a common dilemma (Willis et al., 2022). From a just transition perspective, it is necessary not to lose sight of outputs entirely, as a core tenet is to avoid delaying decarbonisation and creating further lock-in (Atteridge & Strambo, 2020). This has been referred to as the 'sustainability-inclusivity' tension, as delayed action could contribute to distributive injustices impacting socially marginalised communities (Ciplet & Harrison, 2020). However, focusing on procedure over outputs may help to counteract the 'politics of urgency' that can be present in community sustainability transitions research (Schmid & Taylor Aiken, 2023).

Output legitimacy is a key component of successful CAs, and the labour of participants should be translated into concrete policy actions that are clearly communicated to the public (Devaney et al., 2020). The goal of output legitimacy reiterates the importance of the 'before' and 'after' work of deliberative processes. A key finding from this research is the importance of the initial 'warm up' phase, ensuring the approach is co-designed with local stakeholders and embedded alongside strategic actions at multiple scales (e.g., neighbourhood, district, county and regional). This should combine with adequate resources in the 'follow-on' phase to align ideas with local initiatives and link teams to potential funding mechanisms. This 'before' and 'after' event work is important for maintaining the trust and positive energy created in sites for material participation, which generate valuable social capital for future place-based deliberation (Wang et al., 2023). Further research is needed to explore how prototypes generated by Climathons can optimally support local climate governance.

From a policy perspective, this research demonstrates the value of place-based deliberative methodologies for deepening engagement in climate issues, and their suitability for rural locations. This aligns with recommendations by the UK's Climate Change Committee on incorporating more deliberative governance approaches into climate policy (Climate Change Committee, 2022). Despite being likely cheaper and more agile than some other forms of deliberative democracy, Climathons are not an 'easy win'. However, their deliberative potential can be enhanced via some of the adaptations suggested in this paper. We recommend co-designing events with local stakeholders, aligning with existing local initiatives,

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