

**Citizens' Assemblies and Deliberative
Democracy**
An Exchange between Ireland and the UK



Forward by the Irish Ambassador to London

It was a privilege to host this seminar bringing together a diverse group of participants with a firm commitment to social change and political reform. This seminar provided an opportunity to reflect on the practice of deliberative democracy in Ireland and our recent experience of citizens' assemblies.

Since 2016, six citizens' assemblies have taken place addressing a variety of political questions in Ireland. The assemblies have proven themselves to be an effective method to tackle some of the most complex and thorny policy issues facing Irish society. The widespread public and political acceptance of the process has led to assemblies quickly becoming a valued element of Irish democracy.

While each assembly in Ireland faced a unique question and specific context, many lessons can be drawn from the overall process. The breadth of experience of our seminar participants ensured multiple differing perspectives on the suitability and applicability of these lessons to local, regional and national social change and political reform efforts in Great Britain.

Continued reflection on our democratic structures and practices is essential to safeguarding them. Open debate and thoughtful discussion are at the heart of vibrant democracies. Creating space for this discussion enabled us to not only acknowledge what worked well in Ireland but also to recognise the limitations of the assembly model and to consider alternative methods of engaging the public in our democratic process.

I would like to sincerely thank Katherine Zappone and Michael Little for their sustained dedication to advancing the discussion on deliberative democracy, and for their assistance facilitating this seminar.

H.E. Mr. Martin Fraser

Part One: The Backdrop

Preface

Ireland has a codified written constitution. A living, breathing constitution. One that is evolving beyond its patriarchal roots.

In the last decade, two amendments exemplify the evolution:

- The 34th Amendment (2015): Article 41.4: 'Marriage may be contracted in accordance with law by two persons without distinction as to their sex'
- The 36th Amendment (2018): Article 40: 3.3 'Provision may be made by law for the regulation of termination of pregnancy.'

These changes do not set Ireland apart. In fact, they bring the country into line with other economically developed nations. But the process of achieving change is different.

Like most major social change around the world, the catalyst and drive came not from politicians and parliaments but from moral agents going against the grain of the dominant moral order and organising for change. Building on the LGBTQ+ rights and feminist movements around the world, what Mancur Olsen calls small, concentrated, disciplined and focused groups of social activists -including Katherine Zappone co-convenor of this seminar- fought for over a decade to change the minds of their fellow citizens and politicians.

In both cases, grass roots movements were the catalyst for change, and led to the Irish Government commissioning citizens' assemblies, each bringing together 99 people chosen by sortition to take evidence and deliberate on the need for change. Government accepted the assemblies' recommendations, in each case for a change in the constitution, which in Ireland requires a referendum. In both cases, a clear majority of the people voted in favour.

The Seminar

The seminar was convened by the Irish Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Martin Fraser, and by Katherine Zappone, a community organiser, academic and former Senator and then Teachta Dála and member of the Cabinet in the 2016 to 2020 government. The premise for the meeting was simple. In Ireland, there are clear Oireachtas (parliament) procedures that oblige the government to respond to Citizen Assembly recommendations.

The seminar explored a single question: do these practices inform the future of democracy?

The seminar was organised by the Embassy and Ratio. It brought together a diverse group of people working to extend democracy in a range of ways: leading major movements of change; working on behalf of residents in economically deprived neighbourhoods; building on the power of co-operative and mutual organisations; working as an elected politician in Westminster; releasing the power of communities through community organising and new local democratic processes; helping the citizens' assembly movement

in the U.K. to cohere and grow; providing the evidence base for better democracy and government.

There convening did not have an objective other than to reflect and explore. As Kate Brown from the Co-operative Group reflected after the meeting: “we need more conversations like this, bringing together diverse expertise, convened by a person or organisation in authority, and adopting a neutral stance, and seeking new ways of addressing major policy challenges”.

Katherine Zappone on the Irish Experience

This is a perilous time for democracy in the world, and for peace and prosperity. We all have a role to play in recovering trust in democracy and the institutions of state. In Ireland, as elsewhere in the world, the story I will tell today started, as it always does, in relationships between citizens, residents and the state at local, regional and central level.

I participated in the two movements for change we will discuss today – in different roles and positions. I was in civil society for most of marriage equality. For reproductive justice (repealing the abortion ban in our Constitution), I sat at the Cabinet table.

In both cases, however, I had a passionate commitment to and belief in the power of deliberative democracy to become integral to the change. I think it's safe to say that both wins reverberated around the world as much because of the process as the result. In Ireland we used a combination of civil society movements, deliberative democracy, direct democracy and representative democracy.

Our focus today is the citizen assembly component, and the fit between deliberative and representative democracy.

Stated simply, a citizens' assembly is group of randomly selected citizens (selected to represent the population) that are tasked to take evidence, reflect and make recommendations about public policy.

It is a form of deliberative democracy where citizens deliberate with respect, reflective information being provided to them on both or several sides of the argument.

In Ireland, the Government sets the terms of reference, appoints an independent chair, establishes a secretariat and commits resources to host the assembly. The Government requires itself to receive the recommendations of the assembly, to debate them within parliament and at Cabinet and to act on the recommendations, one way or another.

The assemblies were held, expert evidence was presented, stories were told and respectful discussions were held at tables. People heard a diverse range of political views. Different values were reflected both in the assembly membership and in the people giving evidence or telling their stories. The stories have the most influence. Assembly members are moved by testimony on the impact on the lives of real people.

In the cases of marriage equality and reproductive justice, the recommendations of the citizens' assemblies required a change in the constitution, and in Ireland that requires a

referendum. The Government accepted the recommendations and organised votes for the people to decide for or against marriage equality, and for or against removing the constitutional ban on abortion.

Why were the assemblies effective?

I will not provide an exhaustive analysis, just a few reflections from the inside to help the seminar conversation along.

First, if most major social change is the product of relationships in civil society, build on that platform. Don't ignore it. In my work with Ratio, I coined the term 'inclusive statecraft'. It means re-balancing state and civil society (relationships between people and between peoples, and not just the wonderful work of civil society organisations). We must remove the assumption that political change comes from the state only.

Second, particularly in times of polarisation, it is politically advantageous for elected politicians to tackle intransigent issues by rowing in behind social movements and taking up the baton from civil society leaders. At each stage in the two stories I shared, more people in Ireland shifted their views. Once the mandate is clear, the politics becomes easy.

Third, the direct link between representative, deliberative and direct democracy helps. Too much deliberative democracy ends with recommendations that nobody hears. In Ireland, the Government and parliamentarians agreed to support what the people wanted (a referendum). It delivered on its promise to debate and decide on what the people wanted – it campaigned for what the People recommended, and it passed domestic law—quickly—to implement the desire of the people for legislative change.

Fourth, the process is one example of how to move beyond polarisation. In a Catholic country, as you can imagine, people took stark and distant stances on the two issues. We managed to carry the whole country with us, including those who voted against the reforms.

Fifth, I would like to think that process has reduced some of the democratic deficit afflicting all countries. We re-invigorated the trust of the People. Citizens learned from each other in the assemblies, and from the assemblies. The door-to-door campaigning generated a national conversation with people listening to complex arguments on both sides. People changed their minds—and hearts. As a nation, we are better for it.

Part Two: Reflections: the foundation of deliberative democracy

The discussion at the seminar was wide ranging. After the event, Michael Little from Ratio talked to each of the participants to clarify and better understand their perspectives. This summary is his attempt to capture the flow of the conversation at the Embassy.

The Irish story impressed all the participants. On the other hand, there was a concern that the conversation might have started in the wrong place, that is with the solution not the problem. Some seminar participants were working with people whose faith in representative democracy, particularly the over centralised Westminster version, is low to

non-existent. Many of these people are innovating in their communities, seeking hyper-local ways to recover trust in democracy.

Simon Duffy, co-founder of Citizen Network for example, has been collaborating with activists and system leaders in Sheffield to exploit the passion and drive local people invest in their neighbourhoods. They partly draw their inspiration from the Chartists, the 19th century working class movement that fought to extend representative democracy, for example to secure universal male suffrage. The Sheffield work reflects, in part, the New Municipalist movement building across Europe that seeks to make politics more proximal to people, give a greater role to grass roots and civil society organisations and re-balance the relationship between state and civil society. Barcelona en Comú is perhaps the best known and most politically successful example of the movement. One of its founders, Ada Colau Ballano, was elected Mayor of Barcelona from 2015 to 2023.

Simon's primary interest is in democratic reform that starts with civil society. Mike Wilson, leader of the Pembroke House Settlement in South London takes this idea further by building out from organic deliberative processes in day-to-day associational life. A Settlement is well placed for this work. Established in England around 140 years ago as a link between elite schools and universities and economically disadvantaged communities, and spreading to the United States, they are seen, by Robert Putnam for example, as fundamental to reason why states gave in to public opinion and began to invest in public goods such as universal education and health care, and progressive taxation.

The work of Jane Addams who established Hull House Settlement in Chicago guides the 21st Century Settlement at Pembroke House. Addams worked to socialise democracy from quotidian conversations, and to connect people across social barriers. What might appear to some public policy analysts as mundane private activity is, for many local activists the foundation for what we might term 'organic deliberative democracy'. Clubs. Door knocking to gather local opinion. Public living rooms that connect strangers. Street parties. This is echoed in the work of Tracey Hadden-Loh at the Brookings Institute who shows how people use shared spaces and economic exchanges to structure decision making around hyper-local politics; decisions about the things that matter to local people. Conversations coalesce into what Hadden-Loh calls a web of association, and then into representative, problem solving, local coalitions.

Pembroke House's contribution to organic deliberative democracy is to connect, speak truth, act and grow with the community.

The work of Duffy, Wilson and Hadden-Loh are focused on a place, a neighbourhood, town or small city. But the existential threats to human life bleed across places. They are global. Larger movements for social change emerge to tackle these broader challenges. As Clare Farrell, co-founder of Extinction Rebellion or XR observed, these movements can be seen by governments as an annoyance and threat or as a gift, as part of the rationale for major social change. XR members have been arrested and imprisoned, but their work can open conversations with the public, force reluctant corporate actors into action and be part of the argument governments use to lever concessions from legitimate actors in political life.

Ultimately, most major social change has its roots in movements like XR, as per the oft quoted Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens' can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has".

Historically, civil society organisations have built out from what appears to work in organic deliberative democratic processes, and major movements for change. Kate Brown sees the link in the principles of shared responsibility, democratic member control, voluntary and open membership, autonomy and independence, fairness and equity that underpin the Co-operative movement, a series of contexts that replicate the agon, practical policy and human rights aspirations and that characterise deliberative democracy at community level.

This can work at the level of place, as exemplified in Middleton Co-operating, an initiative in a town of 40,000 in Rochdale, Greater Manchester that uses strategies such as community wealth building, building local supply chains, and improving essential services like housing, food, and energy. The overarching objective is to become a 'co-operative town'. The Co-operative movement also operates at scale; there are seven million members of the Co-operative Group and 15 million co-operative memberships in the U.K. Work is underway to re-harness and refocus the movement's potential to influence political decision making at Westminster, for example through its MPs, and in regional and local government.

Part Three: Reflections: citizens' Assemblies in the U.K.

Citizens' assemblies also operate in this broader deliberative space. The Irish examples encouraged participants at the seminar to reflect on opportunities, challenges and ways forward for citizens' assemblies in the UK. Nobody in the room -including Yasamin Alttahir from Involve, a charity whose mission is to make public participation and deliberation core to U.K. democracy- saw the method as a panacea. But equally, everyone recognised that more could be done to ensure assemblies extend U.K. democracy.

Rebecca McKee from the Institute for Government reminded the seminar that despite the centralised nature of Westminster politics and the unelected second chamber, there are examples of democratic innovation in representative democracy in the U.K. outside of Westminster and Whitehall. Wales is currently undergoing electoral reform and changes to the Senedd Cymru. The Scottish government and Welsh Senedd had both run citizens assemblies. There may be opportunities to extend innovation into the deliberative space.

At the same time, Rebecca identified several barriers to progress. The U.K electorate is frustrated with both democracy and public policy. Lack of trust in democracy and institutions of state is as significant in the U.K. as it is elsewhere in Europe. Politicians can be suspicious of innovation that is perceived to undermine their role. Member of Parliament Ellis Chowns picked up this theme. She noted that the legitimacy of deliberative democracy had to be established in the U.K. as it has in Ireland. There are strong memes in political discourse. Some politicians think that the electorate look to representative democracy to make the big decisions; that voters don't want to be asked to do a job that others are paid to do. Many politicians cannot see how ordinary people could

do their job. There are straightforward solutions to these problems. Rebecca McKee proposed learning from the Irish Constitutional Convention of 2012-2014 that invited politicians into the deliberative process. It was established to address mistrust in the political process following the 2008 economic crisis. The Assembly brought together 66 citizens with 33 politicians from Ireland and Northern Ireland. As well as re-building trust, the process showcased citizen capability and shows how deliberative processes can enhance representative processes.

A case must be made to the public, in nuts-and-bolts terms, for using citizens' assemblies.

Legitimacy is built from the discipline and rigour needed to deliver effective citizens' assemblies. But the process can be expensive, leading groups to cut corners. There is no state budget line for the process as there is Ireland and other E.U. states. Yasamin Alttahir has been studying the field. It is very dispersed: -a mix of big and small NGOs and a few private companies alongside a lot of self-employed people who have long been advocates for assemblies and / or practitioners. At times the field can be insular, and this can act as a break on learning, innovation and wider application of citizens' assemblies. The sector has not invested in its development. There is no accreditation process, or minimum standards. There is little evidence of value for money.

Yasamin explained that the U.K. Democracy Network is one attempt to build the credibility of the sector. At the end of 2026, it will publish the first State of Deliberative Democracy report.

Progress will require inclusivity. A citizens' assembly is one way of doing deliberative democracy. There are others. Again, more evidence is needed. Where do citizens' assemblies fit into the wider field? What do they bring that other methods do not?

And what are the limits of citizens' assemblies? Clare Farrell noted that the Irish cases studies described by Katherine Zappone built on substantial movements for change, came in the wake of major international policy shifts and were further legitimated with referenda and by representative democracy. She asked would the method be as successful in the context of supporting public policy around migration or climate change.

Where will evidence be found? Rebecca McKee encouraged the establishment of international benchmarks. Listening to and learning from case examples from Ireland, France, Scotland and other countries, including failures as well as successes, will inform and support the development of the field in the U.K. Some of the learning goes beyond deliberative democracy. Rebecca reminded the seminar that public inquiries suffer as much as citizens' assemblies from the failure to act on recommendations.

Artificial intelligence will likely be a part of the process of building better evidence. Machines learn from conversations, the same core currency as deliberative democracy. Machines see patterns in human interaction that human's do not (and vice-versa). It is now possible to use recordings of deliberation to measure how participants connect, build trust, identify pathways to compromise, and arrive at policy recommendations.

Concluding remarks

There is crisis of democracy in the Western World. The need to extend and modernise democracy is widely acknowledged, although progress is slow. Examples of good practice -like the use of deliberative democracy in Ireland- can inform the process of reform and help states arrive at what Katherine Zappone calls building a more inclusive statecraft.

The format of the seminar at the Irish Embassy tried to model the deliberation needed to support change. The Irish Ambassador to the U.K. created an independent space. The event sought to bring together people with a mix of expertise in social reform. The aim was to bring people who wouldn't otherwise meet and get them talking about issues they might otherwise avoid.

The seminar brought the conversation back to everyday deliberative democracy in coffee shops, on the high street, and in town hall meetings. Major social change begins with community conversations and evolves through moral agents leading small, concentrated, disciplined groups. The state is often at the end of the story of social reform, not the beginning.

The U.K. has invested in significant innovation in representative democracy. There is clearly scope to invest in and learn from deliberative democracy, and to establish links between it and national, regional and local government.

There is a lot of scepticism about deliberative democracy, not least among elected politician, but representative democracy is faced first with a loss of trust in its work and second by mounting existential threats, for example from climate change, uncontrolled migration and unethical A.I. Governments can find ways to use a range of deliberative processes, organic and organised to inform, lead, support public policy reform, nationally and locally.

Progress in the U.K. may depend on the maturity of the citizens' assembly sector, and its ability to adopt higher standards, and adapt to evidence about the effectiveness of the methodology.

Participants

Katherine Zappone, Ratio & Trinity College Dublin, Co-convenor

Martin Fraser, Irish Ambassador to the United Kingdom, Co-convenor

Yasamin Alttahir, Director of Advocacy and Communications at Involve

Kate Brown, Council Secretary to the Co-operative Group

Ellie Chowns, Member of Parliament

Simon Duffy, Citizen Network

Clare Farrell, co-founder of XR, Extinction Rebellion

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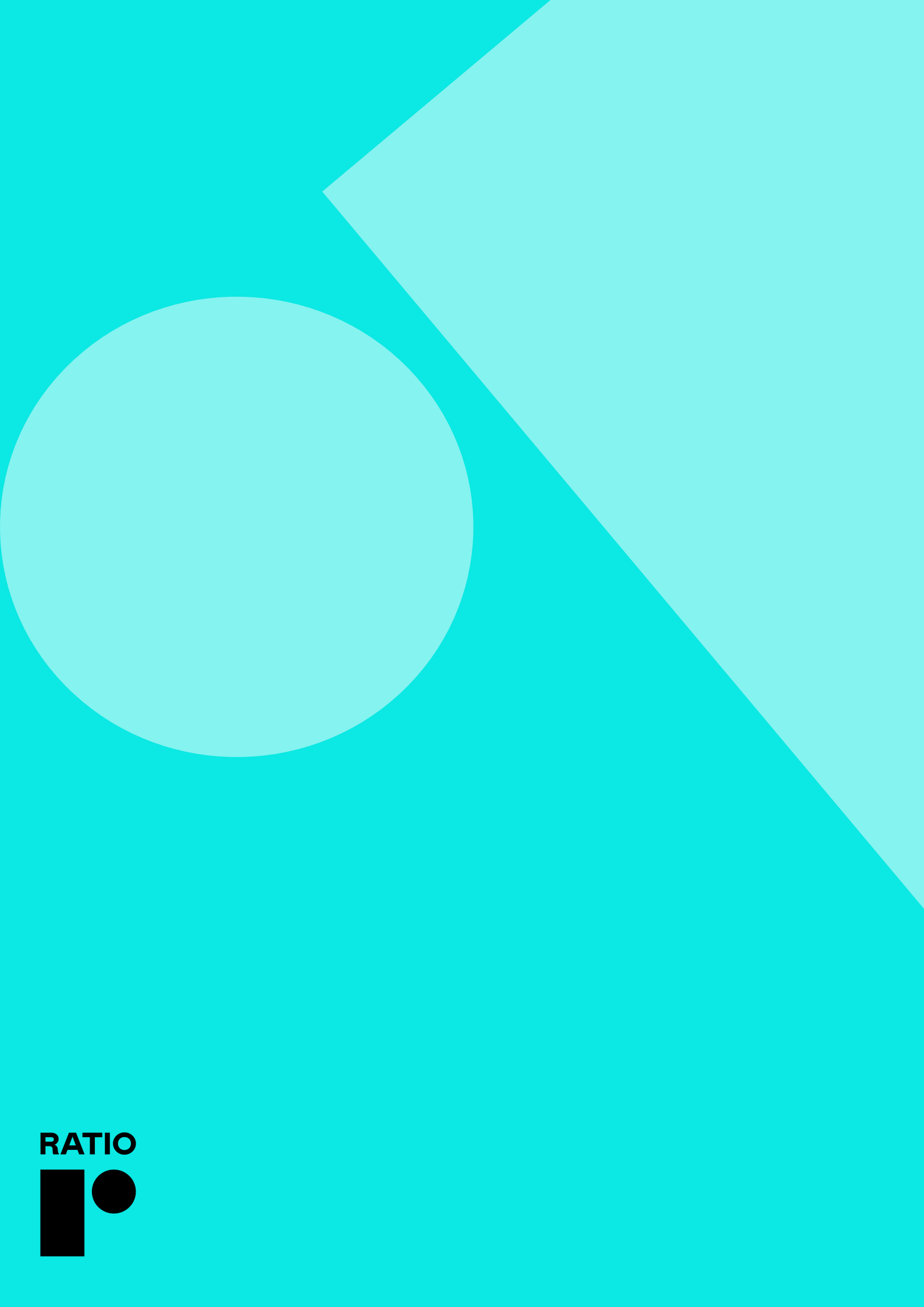
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