

Community action for sustainable development is an important and yet neglected source of innovation for sustainability



## Introducing Grassroots Innovations for Sustainable Development

**What are Grassroots Innovations, and why are they important? Here we present the key findings of our research so far, in an overview of our agenda-setting paper from Environmental Politics**

Grassroots innovations for sustainable development take many different forms. Examples include furniture recycling schemes, organic food co-operatives, low impact self-housing developments, farmers' markets, cycle networks, local car clubs, and community composting schemes. Since 1992, local authorities in the UK have produced over 400 sustainability strategies that promote these kinds of activities. Shell Better Britain's network of groups grew from 10,000 in 1992 to 26,000 in 2002.

We understand them to involve networks of activists and community groups generating novel, bottom-up solutions for sustainable development, and that typically respond to the local situation and the interests and values of the communities involved. In contrast to mainstream business greening, grassroots innovations operate in civil society and social enterprise arenas.

Important points about grassroots innovators are provided below.

1. Conventionally, government policy and support for sustainable development has considered 'innovation' separately from 'community involvement'. Sustainable innovations are led by firms and market settings; community involvement encourages participation and behaviour change.
2. This division misses an opportunity for considering local communities as sites of innovative activity for sustainable development. Social enterprise and community involvement can be considered as sources of innovative potential.
3. Policy to promote sustainable innovation should extend its view and consider how it can support grassroots innovation in and between communities.
4. Communities can provide niche settings, out of which grassroots innovations can spread, scale-up and be adopted into more commercial and market settings (though this process is far from

automatic). Grassroots innovators provide green ideas, not sustainable blueprints.

5. The kinds of innovation that take place in communities are not limited to greener technologies. More usually, it involves novel organisational arrangements, new values and lifestyle practices that facilitate the use of greener technologies.
6. Small initiatives, repeated many times over, can add up to significant environmental improvements. Local knowledge and capabilities help develop tailor-made sustainable solutions where top-down sometimes measures fail.
7. Certain communities can champion unpopular and difficult issues because it matters to them. This provides a vital source of innovative diversity when similar issues become salient more widely.
8. Grassroots innovations mobilise collective solutions to sustainability, which helps overcome a sense of powerlessness or futility when sustainability is considered merely a matter of individual consumer choices.
9. However, many grassroots innovators struggle to obtain resources for their projects. Raising grants to survive can eclipse investment in long-term development of an initiative.
10. Many grassroots initiatives are technology takers – the production of modern technologies makes it difficult to adopt and develop locally appropriate forms.
11. The local roots of grassroots initiatives can make scaling-up and diffusion difficult. Amongst socially excluded groups, the initiative is a means to another end, such as the skills to enter employment, or wealth to purchase goods and services.
12. Many grassroots initiatives fail. Risk aversion amongst policy-makers means they are reluctant to support these ventures. But failure and, more importantly, learning from failure is a positive part of the innovation experience. Policy-makers need to take risks, but to do so with effective mechanisms for learning in place.
13. Significant change relies on forces that operate way above the local level. Grassroots innovators alone are unable to drive sustainable development, but they are able to provide diverse seeds for change when conditions in the wider society and economy are right.

**“By viewing community-level activities as innovative niches, we gain a better understanding of the potential and needs of grassroots initiatives, as well as insights into the challenges they face and their possible solutions”**

**Gill Seyfang and Adrian Smith**



14. Finally, our understanding and policies for innovation, developed in commercial and market settings, may be inadequate for grassroots community initiatives. Research is needed to develop our understanding of local communities as sources of sustainable innovations.

Adapted from Gill Seyfang and Adrian Smith (2007) ‘Grassroots innovations for sustainable development: towards a new research and policy agenda’ *Environmental Politics*, volume 16 (4) pp 584-603.

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