

# GRASSROOTS INNOVATIONS

RESEARCH WORKSHOP MAY 2012

An emerging body of research is beginning to study the potential impacts of civil society-led innovations for sustainable development



## Grassroots Innovations for Sustainability Invitation to a Research Workshop

**To be held on 16-18th May 2012 at the University of Sussex, Brighton, UK. Organised by Adrian Smith (SPRU at University of Sussex) and Gill Seyfang (University of East Anglia).**

It is commonplace nowadays for political and business leaders to evoke 'innovation' in response to multiple economic, social and environmental challenges in sustainable development. Often, this evocation moves no further than a framing of 'innovation systems' in which rent seeking firms operating in markets develop cleaner products and processes in partnership with science and technology institutes and institutional investors.

This workshop is also interested in innovation for sustainability, but we wish to look beneath and beyond the mainstream and consider alternative sustainabilities being developed by grassroots innovators. The

diversity of innovations emerging from this alternative domain is wide, and includes activities such as local food networks, community energy co-operatives, co-housing initiatives, re-manufacturing workshops and tool swapping, complementary currencies, furniture recycling, community composting, public space groups, walking school-buses, car clubs, sustainable practice support groups, and more. What this growing list of grassroots innovations have in common is that they involve networks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development; solutions that respond to the local situation and

the knowledge, interests and values of the communities involved.

Until recently, the potential role of grassroots innovations in offering sustainability solutions has largely been forgotten and overlooked in policy documents, business strategies and academic research. However, an emerging body of research is beginning to study and understand the scope and scale of this sector, and its potential role in achieving transitions to sustainable development. This workshop will bring together experts in grassroots innovations from around the world, to exchange knowledge and ideas about different ways of understanding community-led

# Aim: critical reflection, analytical consolidation and developing research agendas

innovations for sustainability, and how those innovative ideas might be harnessed to achieve (or transform) sustainability objectives.

Unlike mainstream approaches, grassroots initiatives tend to arise in civil society and social economy arenas and involve committed individuals and groups experimenting with social innovations as well as developing appropriate technologies. These contrasting settings, origins, and purposes suggest that theories and policies developed in mainstream innovation arenas may not be suitable for grassroots innovations. Moreover, many grassroots innovations embody explicitly normative agendas, and which seek to mobilise distinctly political processes, as well as the organisational and economic questions typical of conventional innovation studies.

With this point of departure in mind, our objectives for the workshop are as follows:

- Compare studies of grassroots innovations for sustainability in different countries
- Consolidate and develop theories of grassroots innovation through comparison across cases
- Map out the agenda for future research for grassroots innovation, and contribute to the emerging research community
- Share experience in research engagement with activists, policy-makers, and entrepreneurs
- Document the workshop through paper publication in a high-quality journal special issue

Our aim overall is to create a forum for critical reflection on research into the roles played by pro-active local communities, grassroots organisations, and social movements in developing their innovations for sustainability.

Grassroots innovations have a long history in both the global north and global south. In this instance, however, our focus will be limited to ‘developed’ country settings. This delimitation is intended to permit comparative perspective around common challenges of sustainability transitions, sustainable consumption, and alternative economics in wealthier societies.

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## Critical issues for grassroots innovations

Grassroots innovations are often framed in one of four different ways, and which need not be mutually exclusive. Each of these framings considers differently the possibilities and pitfalls for engaging with mainstream innovation agendas, institutions, and markets; and weighs up in different ways the possible roles grassroots innovations might play in forging alternative pathways for innovation and sustainability.

### 1. Visionary alternatives

Grassroots innovations anticipate new, more socially just and environmentally sustainable economies. These initiatives and their wider movements are a vital force for citizen-led responses to the challenges of sustainable development. As exemplary ‘niche spaces’ they permit experimentation with radical sustainabilities and their development. This provides material and discursive resources for coalitions seeking to transform wider institutions and political economies.

### 2. Flawed utopianism

Faced with dominant economic and social structures, the efforts of grassroots innovators are often criticised for being excessively optimistic and failing to attend to the deeper causes of the problems they seek to address. Others, however, interpret these ‘failed’ alternatives as providing a crucial source of critique of incumbent regimes of production and consumption. By trying to do things differently, grassroots innovators make very real and very visible the institutional, political and economic injustices of conventional regimes.

### 3. Coping strategies

Grassroots innovations are temporary fixes either in the absence of more developed and marketable solutions for sustainability; or, sometimes, because they are solutions developed by and for people excluded from mainstream economic activity. Once marketable solutions have been developed, or once participants have the skills and capabilities to join mainstream activity, then the grassroots innovation is dropped. In other instances, the innovative initiative does not seek to be strategic and influence wider changes, but is simply a local project addressing a local problem or concern.

### 4. Appropriable niches

A final perspective considers grassroots innovations as contributing diversity into a wider pool of innovations that include reforms emanating from conventional regimes of production and consumption (e.g. firms in markets, universities, research institutes, sector partnerships). Grassroots innovations widen the plurality of ideas for sustainable innovation. As such, the aim becomes to consider whether and how local projects network, ideas diffuse, and how movements for grassroots innovation interact (indirectly and directly) with progressive business strategies; and whether these processes might constitute processes for genuine sustainable development, or simply ease capture and narrow commercialisation by conventional market actors.

## Workshop themes and papers

This workshop aims to cut across all four of the above framings. The aim is to consider whether and how grassroots innovators network with one another, the extent to which movements for grassroots innovation approaches exist and how they operate, and whether or not these developments represent the emergence of alternative pathways for sustainability. In keeping with the critical spirit of the workshop, we will also discuss the dilemmas of going to scale, the risks of capture and instrumentality from elites, accusations of marginality compared to mainstream reforms, and disputes over the evaluative frameworks applied to grassroots initiatives. Consequently, we invite you to come to the workshop with a paper that addresses one or more of our workshop themes:

### How do grassroots innovations operate?

- Different kinds of grassroots innovations
- The significance of different spatial, political, cultural and economic contexts in the framing and development of 'niches' for grassroots innovation
- Institutions for grassroots innovation – sustaining resource streams, organisational models, knowledge institutions, the social economy, and representations of grassroots innovations

### How might grassroots innovations help constitute alternatives in the context of dominant regimes?

- The dynamics of spreading grassroots innovations through networks, programmes and movements that help the innovation replicate elsewhere, scale-up in size, or translate into other settings
- The dilemmas, strategies and practicalities faced by locally-based and radical grassroots innovations that seek to diffuse their ideas and practices
- The possibilities for linking grassroots innovation activity to broader political and economic drivers of transformation, and what this implies for reframing grassroots innovation

### How can theories of grassroots innovation be further developed?

- The appropriateness of different theories and analytical frameworks – e.g. strategic niche management; network governance; institutional entrepreneurship; social movement theory; political economy; social entrepreneurship; solidarity, ecological and alternative economics
- Researching with grassroots innovators – ethics, project lifecycles, expectations, institutional pressures
- Ensuring research informs activism and policy

We stress that this list of themes is indicative, not prescriptive. We welcome other suggestions in line with the workshop aims. However, we do require all papers to be based in empirical work, and which analyses grassroots innovation in domains such as energy, housing, food, mobility, economic exchange, employment, manufacturing, and leisure. We intend comparison across the diverse national, sector and analytical perspectives brought by participants to indicate robust and useful research insights and future agendas.

## Activity and outputs

The workshop will run for two or three days over 16-18 May 2012\* at the [University of Sussex\\*\\*](#) in Brighton, UK. Sussex University is located in the [South Downs National Park](#) on the edge of Brighton, which is twenty minutes from London Gatwick airport. The event is timed to coincide with a major international [arts festival](#) and [fringe festival](#) at this sunny city by the sea.

We are aiming for a small, focussed event, bringing together around 10-15 experts in the field, to share research ideas in a relaxed setting. The emphasis will be on discussion and interaction, and we ask that you commit to coming for the whole workshop. Participants will contribute a full paper in advance, to be circulated and read as preparation for the event. At the workshop, there will be no formal paper presentations; rather, we will use our time together to discuss the papers in depth in thematic sessions. A keynote speaker (to be confirmed) will provide reflections across the workshop themes. These reflections and the papers will be revised with a view to inclusion in a special issue of a high-impact journal. In the first instance, we will approach [Global Environmental Change](#) and similar journals with a proposal.

The workshop programme includes plenty of time for informal discussions and networking, to help build connections between participants, and facilitate ongoing discussions after the event about research and engagement with grassroots innovation.

**At the workshop, there will be no formal presentations; we will use our time together for in-depth discussions of pre-prepared papers, coupled with dedicated informal networking time.**

\* Schedule to be confirmed – please book the three days in your diary, but check with us before making travel arrangements.

\*\* hyperlinks active in pdf

## About the organisers

**Adrian Smith** is a senior researcher at **SPRU** (Science & Technology Policy Research) and member of the **STEPS Centre** (Social, Technological and Environmental Pathways to Sustainability) at the University of Sussex. His research draws upon insights from innovation studies, political science and science and technology studies, in order to critically analyse the politics and governance of innovations for sustainability in both developed and developing countries. In recent years this has included research into grassroots innovations in settings as diverse as energy, food and housing in the UK, the social technologies movement in Brazil and Argentina, as well as a history of the appropriate technology movement. An international workshop he organised under the theme of the politics and governance of innovations for sustainability transitions in 2007 led to special issues in Research Policy and Policy Sciences.

**Gill Seyfang** is an RCUK Academic Fellow at **CSERGE** (Centre for Social and Economic Research on the Global Environment) at the University of East Anglia. Her interdisciplinary approach covers environmental sociology, social economy, geography, environmental politics and development studies. Research examines alternatives to mainstream systems of provision, seeking to evaluate and demonstrate their contribution to a challenging 'new economics' vision of sustainable development. This includes a number of projects looking at grassroots innovations in energy, housing and complementary currencies. She has organised a national conference on grassroots innovations for sustainability for practitioners and researcher in the UK.



The research workshop could examine grassroots innovations in a range of fields, including energy, housing, transport, food, and exchange

**Danielle King** is a Project Coordinator at SPRU and will be handling the practicalities of the workshop. Her email is [d.l.king@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:d.l.king@sussex.ac.uk); her telephone number is 0044 1273 678166.

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The Leverhulme Trust

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