

Grassroots Innovation Movements

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Published by Routledge in August 2016, Grassroots Innovation Movements draws inspiration across the globe and over the decades. It begins with these words.

In August 2015, while we were writing this book, a group of sustainability activists were gathering in the grounds of a borrowed chateau on the outskirts of Paris. They were intent upon ‘eco-hacking’ the future. What this meant was turning the chateau into a temporary innovation camp, equipped with the tools for developing a variety of technologies of practical and symbolic value for low-carbon living. These prototypes made use of open source designs and instructions in order that others can access, adapt and make use of these developments. The activity of the camp was publicized widely through social media and drew the attention of many commentators and even senior politicians. (See www.poc21.cc for examples.)

The camp was called POC21. Its location and timing were significant. Paris was gearing up to host, in December 2015, the 21st Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (COP 21), and the latest meeting of governments and global elites figuring out how to address climate change. Meanwhile, POC21 stands for, and seeks, a ‘proof of concept’ for an alternative approach. POC21 brought together on site over a hundred makers, designers, engineers, scientists and geeks, drawn from various international activist networks, and many more that joined in virtually over social media, or visited, and committed to prototyping for a fossil-free, zero-waste society. The designs and hacks they developed collaboratively ranged from low-cost wind turbines, to facilities for urban farming, to a 3D-printed bottle-top water filtration device; from easy-build

cargo bikes, to open source energy monitors, to permaculture; and from low-consumption recirculating showers, to portable solar power packs. Their alternative approach is based on the premise that people at the grassroots level already have the ideas, knowledge, tools and capabilities required to create their own innovative solutions to climate change and sustainable development. Drawing upon practical initiatives connected to a variety of open source, collaborative peer production networks globally, the aim at POC21 is to mobilize a mainstreaming of these ready-made solutions. Immediately after their five-week camp, the organizers of POC21 set out the follow-up challenge as ‘how can we turn this momentum into a sustainable movement’ (email correspondence, 30 September 2015).

Grassroots Innovation Movements argues that a movement already exists. POC21 taps into increasing interest among growing groups and networks of people for directly hacking, making and modifying the world they find around them, and refashioning it towards more inclusive, fairer and sustainable goals. Furthermore, POC21 connects unconsciously to a longer tradition of subverting high-level summitry in order to raise awareness of grassroots solutions. These subversions go right back to the first United Nations (UN) Summit on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972. At the Stockholm summit, a group called Powwow convened activists who emphasized their argument for radically different development alternatives to the political and economic interests of the industrialists and policymakers orchestrating the main summit, with the organization of a demonstration of alternative technologies emblematic of the futures Powwow wanted. Although largely forgotten now, the legacy of Powwow, as with POC21, can be seen as one of a multitude of demonstrations of grassroots innovation arising around the world over decades, and whose associated social movements have bequeathed practices as varied as wind energy and participatory design, agroecology and eco-housing, as well as an insistent idea that alternative forms of innovation and sustainable developments are necessary and possible. POC21 was another moment galvanizing grassroots innovation for sustainable developments.

Opening *Grassroots Innovation Movements* with examples such as POC21 and Powwow might give the impression that grassroots innovation for sustainable developments is predominantly a Northern environmentalist concern. Far from it! In the same year that Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962) highlighted alarming industrial contamination and environmental decline, and became catalytic for

Northern environmentalism, activists in Kerala launched Kerala Sasthra Sahithya Parishad (KSSP, lit. Kerala Science Literature Forum), a programme for making science and technology work for the needs and priorities of local communities. Initially, KSSP involved a group of science writers and teachers that published textbooks in their local language, aiming to make science and technology more widely available and socially relevant to grassroots communities, rather than to the plans of elite industrial modernizers. Similar groups formed across India and joined together into the People's Science Movement. Their vision was to re-imagine and reorientate science and technology towards the lived experiences and knowledges of local communities. Over the years the movement has dedicated itself to grassroots activism and improvements in people's lives that work towards different kinds of sustainable developments compared both to the high modernist ambitions of the Indian state and to Gandhian village self-sufficiency.

High-level summitry provides arenas for grassroots innovators from the global South, too (Letty et al, 2012). Examples in agroecology, housing, energy and recycling, developed through initiatives such as the Social Technology Network in Brazil, were displayed at the People's Summit in Flamengo Park at the Rio+20 Summit. Activists in these networks consciously draw upon lessons from experiences from appropriate technology in South America two decades earlier; and they connect with wider social movements today to press for a different kind of development. A thorough critique of industrialization models offered by elites was an important part of the Powwow agenda in Stockholm. Like POC21, the Social Technology Network and many others since, Powwow recognized solutions had to work in diverse circumstances. But what all these grassroots innovation movements share is a commitment to helping people access tools for building alternatives. The aim in our book is to make grassroots innovation movements more visible, and to learn from their experiences, in order that people can better understand, appreciate and engage with them in the pursuit of sustainable developments. We do this by analysing six case studies from different places and different times:

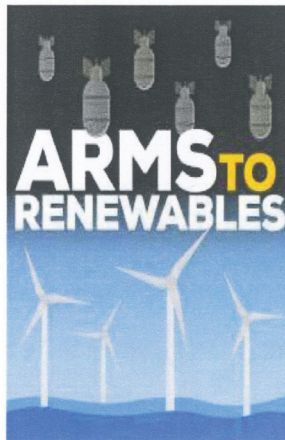
- The movement for socially useful production (UK, 1976–1986)
- The appropriate technology movement (South America, 1970s and 1980s)
- The People's Science Movement (India, 1960s to present)
- Hackerspaces, fablabs and makerspaces (international, 2000s to present)
- The Social Technology Network (Brazil, 2000s to present)
- The Honey Bee Network (India, 1990s to present)

Across these cases, we attempt to identify within their diverse situations some common causes and deep-seated challenges that other grassroots innovation movements might recognize and connect with. Such possibilities will inevitably play out differently in different contexts, but perhaps with greater facility thanks to learning with others from elsewhere.

<https://grassrootsinnovations.org/2016/07/08/new-book-grassroots-innovation-movements/>

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