

GRASSROOTS INNOVATION MOVEMENTS AND SUSTAINABLE GREEN ECONOMIES: DILEMMAS, FRAMINGS, POSSIBILITIES

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Throughout its recent history, sustainability has involved a significant undercurrent of grassroots innovation. Developed through networks of activists and organisations, it has generating novel bottom–up solutions that respond to the local situation and the knowledge, interests and values of the communities involved. Often developed in the social economy, grassroots experimentation continues to generate ‘user-led’ ideas for sustainable production and consumption. Indeed, current debates for the green economy include innovations originating in civil society, with policy-makers and businesses appropriating and translating them into wider markets at scale.

Our paper will review the modern history of grassroots innovation movements and associated research literature in order to suggest potential roles in emerging green economies. Whether it is community food and energy initiatives, local (re-)manufacturing and tool swapping, complementary currencies, community sanitation and water projects, housing co-operatives, participatory rural development, harnessing ICTs for marketing, and so on, there remains a ferment of grassroots activity in sustainable production and consumption. This diversity generates resilience by ensuring options are kept open in the face of uncertainty about how to proceed. It also provides flexibility, preventing us from being locked into a course inappropriate to changing circumstances.

However, our analysis suggests these strengths also generate dilemmas for grassroots innovation movements:

- attending to local specificities whilst simultaneously seeking wide-scale relevance and diffusion,
- being appropriate to existing situations that one ultimately seeks to transform, and
- relying upon project-based solutions when the principles of social justice really require wider systemic changes.

Historical perspective reveals these dilemmas to be enduring features, but also suggests they can be quite productive for dialogues about inclusive forms of future green economies. Each dilemma respectively emphasises a particular framing of grassroots innovation – as a coping strategy, as a visionary vanguard, and as R&D lab for utopia – which in turn foreground different forms of knowledge production. These are summarised in the table below, and will be elaborated in our paper. Each framing has validity. Viewing grassroots innovation movements as experimental spaces for socio-technical systems of sustainable production and consumption, in a reflexive relationship with other spaces of sustainable innovation, provides a further framing (our final row in the table) in to consider this activity in inclusive green economies.

Table: grassroots innovation dilemmas, framings and knowledge production

Grassroots innovation dilemma Framing of grassroots innovation Forms of knowledge emphasised

Locally-specific yet widely-applicable Coping strategies:

Grassroots coping for absence of provision through existing market and state processes (Amin, 2009; Kaplinsky, 2010; Gupta et al, 2003; Bhadurai and Kumar, 2010)

Ethnographic:

- Needs unmet by markets and states
- Livelihood conditions and responses
- Pragmatic sustainability improvements
- Augmentation opportunities for bottom-up solutions

Appropriate to transformed situations Visionary vanguard:

Pioneering socially just and environmentally sustainable economies and societies (Seyfang, 2009; Dagnino, 2009; Abrol, 2005) Instrumental:

- Socio-technical practices under different value systems
- Capabilities and resources required
- Economic, social and environmental performance and feasibility under different contexts
- Production and maintenance requirements
- Advocate and participant perspectives – materiality of radical sustainability discourses

Project-based solutions seeking structural change R&D lab for utopia:

Naive R&D lab for utopia – flawed without a political programme targeting structural change (Dickson, 1974; Rybczynski, 1980)

Critical:

- Institutional misfit (and their reform)
- Lack of infrastructure (and provision - material and social)
- Economic (re-)structures, lack of capital and markets
- Political context (opposing powers, targets and allies)

Experimental spaces relevant to socio-technical foresight Reflexive pluralities:

Source of experimental plurality in debates and practices in innovation policy (Irwin et al, 1994; Smith, 2007; Gibson-Graham, 2008) Reflexive:

- Spaces for socio-technical experimentation and social learning
- Replicable, adaptable and scalable innovations
- Manifestation of alternate agendas for innovation policy
- Indicators of institutional challenges for sustainability
- Empowering by linking to broader social movements