

The perspective of change agents: Why do they engage, what do they learn und what conditions are needed for up-scaling? Insights from three case studies

Key words: Grassroots innovations, social learning, knowledge generation, conditions for transformation

A considerable amount of bottom-up learning is already taking place in various grassroots initiatives. The purpose of our study is to explore the motivations and experiences of co-founders of grassroots initiatives as societal frontrunners. It adds to the literature new insights on social learning and conditions needed for societal transformation.

Long Abstract

There is overwhelming scientific evidence that „we need to fundamentally alter our relationship with the planet we inhabit” (Steffen et al. 2011, IPCC). Long-term, model-based mitigation scenarios for Germany demonstrate that major paradigm shifts need to occur, including concerted political action as much as societal will (Schmid and Knopf 2012). However, current techno-economic and communicative policy responses have achieved only marginal advancements towards sustainability. This is attributed to the fact that current approaches are focussing on the individual but fail to appreciate their complexity of everyday life e.g. the interaction between social practices and social relations, material infrastructures and context (e. g. Shove 2010). As a result, the vast majority of people still do not engage sufficiently into pro- environmental behaviour (Osbaldiston and Schott 2012).

In parallel, societal changes at niche level is already taking place, whether in relation to Transition Towns, energy cooperatives, eco-villages or consumer supported agriculture. According to flagship report of WBGU, the German Advisory Council of Global Change, change agents play a critical role in societal transformation towards sustainability transition as they can “test and advance the options for leaving behind an economy reliant on the use of fossil resources thus helping to develop new leitmotifs, or new visions” (WBGU 2011). In the recent discourse on the driving factors of a “big societal transition” grassroots initiatives are highlighted as potential catalysts in initiating and experimenting with social innovation and social learning at niche level (e. g. Geels 2007). They are in a unique position to beneficially influence consumers’ lifestyle patterns through peer-to-peer education, awareness-raising, empowerment, and due to their power to develop cutting-edge social practices.

Our research draws on new social movement theory describing grassroots initiatives as any type of collaborative social undertaking that is organized at the local community level, has a high degree of participatory decision-making and generally engages the voluntary contribution of time and resources of the organizations’ members to achieve a particular shared cause. This includes the development of socially inclusive innovation processes (Seyfang and Smith, 2007; Vergagt et al., 2014), ecosystem management efforts (Weber, 2000), and most recently the emergence of community energy projects (Bomberg and McEwen, 2012), low-carbon communities (Middlemass and Parish, 2010) and voluntary simplicity movements (Alexander and Usher, 2012).

Yet, change processes in grassroots initiatives are fundamentally different to individualistic models of social change and still an under-researched site of innovation for sustainability (e.g. Seyfang and Longhurst 2013, Feola and Nunes 2013). Based on a review of theories stemming from psychology, sociology, social movement theory, behavioral economics and organizational management as well as recent research on grassroots innovations we elaborated a research framework comprising four levels of research, i) individual level factors, ii) interpersonal level factors, iii) group level factors as well as iv) societal conditions for transformation.

The study focuses on the co-founders of initiatives from three movements present in Germany, namely Carrot Mob Cologne – utilising consumer power to encourage sustainable business behavior, community supported agriculture (CSA) in Bonn – a locally-based economic model of food production and distribution that directly connects farmers and consumers and the co-founders of the Food Sharing network – tackling food waste through facilitating the exchange of groceries.

Semi-structured qualitative interviews are used to explore several concepts assumed to positively influence the development and success of societal transformation at these four levels. The concepts are e.g. worldviews, visions and capabilities, social learning at personal level and group level, self-efficacy at personal level and at group level and societal conditions for up scaling. In particular we explore i) the motivation why individuals become a first mover and (co)-found a grassroots initiative; ii) the definition of success and success factors as perceived by the actors; iii) capabilities and learning experiences as considered essential at different levels; and iv) the conditions needed to scale-up the movement.

First results demonstrate that grassroots activists go well beyond making consumption sustainable. Some of them even refuse the term of consumption completely. Their self concepts comprise roles such as critical pro-active consumers, change agents or communicators right up to the refusal of money, in particular in the case of the co-founders of Food-Sharing Movement. They demonstrate a high awareness about complex and intertwined environmental, social, political, and economic problems on the one hand and stress the importance of tangible and achievable goals on the other hand. Social learning takes place at all levels ranging from personal life style changes to the development of knowledge and skills for managing a network with of over hundred and even several thousands of activists. Co-founders of the initiatives are also aware of also several conditions and constraints for societal change.

The presentation will give an overview on the conceptual framing, highlighting the roles of grassroots in transitions towards sustainable life styles, as well as the case study design. It will introduce criteria proven to be helpful to understand the development and success of grassroots and present respective evidence from interviews with the founders of the three selected case studies. Results are discussed in the light of Salutogenesis, a concept of psychological resilience. Conclusions are drawn with respect to current multi-level approaches.

Summary

The transition to a post-growth society requires social learning at massive scale. In that regard, grassroots initiatives are largely understood as expressions of learning and empowerment processes of consumer citizens. Our purpose is to understand what drives individuals to set up grassroots initiatives? What skills and capacities are required? In how far did they evaluate the initiative as success? Which learning experiences are considered essential? What is needed to scale the movement up and what is needed to contribute to the great transformation? Semi-structured qualitative interviews with co-founders of 3 different grassroots initiatives (Carrot Mob, Community Supported Agriculture and Food-Sharing) were conducted to explore several concepts such as worldviews, visions and capabilities, social learning at personal level and group level, self-efficacy at personal level and at group level and societal conditions for up scaling. Conclusions are drawn with respect to current multi-level approaches.