

Power and politics in grassroots innovation

Panel session at the event [Pathways to sustainability: knowledge, politics and power](#)
8 December 2021 at 13.00-15.00 UTC

Speakers: Flor Avelino, Juan David Reina, Erika Kraemer Mbula, Mario Pansera, Adrian Smith

As with other crises, the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of creative activity amongst grassroots networks in providing mutual care and solidarity between people. But it is not only in periods of acute crisis that grassroots innovation proves crucial. Historically, developments for sustainability have often been initiated bottom-up by creative social movements. Whether in community-led water and sanitation, community-supported agriculture and food, citizen energy projects, peer-produced repair and re-manufacturing networks, or DIY urbanism and many more diverse examples; in their innovativeness, grassroots initiatives nurture sustainability aspirations whose full realisation often anticipates and demands deeper social change.

Today, grassroots innovation continues to produce a wellspring of sustainability quite different to state-led policy missions addressing global goals or green business models mobilising large-scale investment. Where the latter imbue innovation with win-win solutionism, grassroots initiatives perceive in innovation a more contested and prefigurative politics. Or do they? In this session, a panel of researchers engaged in diverse ways with bottom-up sustainability will share reflections the politics of grassroots innovation. We ask:

- How do grassroots innovators avoid criticisms levelled at innovation more generally, namely that sustainability conceived in terms of discrete solutions overlooks deeper questions about power and politics in sustainable transformations?
- How can the transformative potential of grassroots innovation for sustainability be strengthened in the coming years?

Speakers

- **Flor Avelino**, [Erasmus School of Social & Behavioural Sciences](#) and [DRIFT for Transitions](#), Erasmus University of Rotterdam. Flor brings her expertise in transformative social innovation, research collaborations in grassroots sustainable urbanism across Europe, and insights about power in sustainability transitions.
- **Juan David Reina**, Independent Researcher. Juan David brings his involvement in grassroots projects with communities in Colombia and Uganda, and his expertise in inclusive design and engineering. He is also an alumni of the STEPS Centre Summer School.
- **Erika Kraemer Mbula**, [DSI/NRF/Newton Fund Trilateral Chair in Transformative Innovation](#), the 4IR and Sustainable Development, University of Johannesburg. Erika brings expertise in informal innovation in Africa, work with makerspaces and grassroots social enterprises, and policy experience with innovation systems and inclusion in the Fourth Industrial Revolution.
- **Mario Pansera**, [Post-growth Innovation Lab](#), Universidade de Vigo. Mario has studied grassroots innovation initiatives in India, and is now developing important insights for post-growth development that rethinks the founding political and economic assumptions in conventional innovation theory and practice. He is also an alumni of the STEPS Centre Summer School.
- Chair: **Adrian Smith**, [Science Policy Research Unit](#), University of Sussex. Adrian coordinated the STEPS Centre research project, Grassroots Innovation Movements. He continues research in related areas, including most recently the emergence of '[post-automation](#)' social capabilities in industrious grassroots settings.