

Method: Situating pathways in historical contexts

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Concern for the uneven development consequences of mainstream approaches to promoting innovation systems is prompting interest amongst development circles in more inclusive approaches to innovation. A variety of 'inclusive innovation' approaches are being developed and analysed, including many that operate at the grassroots level.

The STEPS Centre research project investigating grassroots innovation movements seeks to engage with debate about these inclusive innovation initiatives. Our approach is to investigate a variety of initiatives that already promote grassroots innovation, or attempted to do so in the past, and situate each in its historical context. The case studies are:

- The People's Science Movement in India, which has been active since the early 1980s
- The movement for social technologies and socially inclusive technology in Brazil and Argentina, active since the early 2000s
- The movement for socially useful production in the UK, active from the mid-1970s to mid-1980s
- The Honey Bee Network active in India, active since 1989
- Hackerspaces and FabLabs promoting grassroots digital fabrication, and active internationally since the early 2000s

Here we reflect on the contributions that our case study methodology can make towards debates about policies and other support for grassroots innovation.

In deliberately looking across cases varied in terms of place and time, the research team hopes to provide an antidote to silver bullet solutions for grassroots innovation. In looking across varied cases, then we expect the importance of context and contingency to become apparent. At the same time, we are interested in identifying common issues across the cases, and that suggest fundamental challenges for grassroots innovation. A review of the literatures associated with grassroots innovation movements has identified three enduring challenges:

- Policy pressure to scale-up and diffuse solutions that originated in particular grassroots contexts;
- The delicate balance between fitting and conforming to powerful agendas of resourceful agencies, whilst seeking to stretch and transform local situations on grassroots terms;
- Relying on project and programmatic solutions to issues whose root causes lie in structures of economic and political power.

In studying the different responses to these issues across varied situations, we hope to generate informed insights for more sensitive and situated support towards

grassroots innovation for sustainability. As such, our study of each case is organised as follows:

- Historical background to the movement studied – what was the context that generated the movement and in which it operates
- Understanding the framings that influence the way grassroots innovators and activists approach solutions, and how they tried to shape the purpose and direction of innovation in society
- Exploring the spaces available to movements to put their framings into practice, and how the material consequences cause reflections on framings
- A discussion / analysis of the pathways that result from this activity, and the key challenges to path building across and beyond the spaces available

In this way analysis aims to address strategies for creating pathways over time, with particular attention paid to the politics and contexts of this grassroots-oriented activity.

Arguments made by historians like John Tosh have influenced our approach to studying these varied pathways. Tosh suggests that 'thinking with history' means recognising 'the profound differences which distinguish past from the present, and the processes over time which explain how the present has grown out of the past'.¹ He argues such reflection serves several important purposes, and which we seek to consider in relation to our grassroots innovation case studies:²

- Understanding the trajectories that have brought us to the present situation deepens our appreciation of current pathways for development, particularly the shifting spaces available to grassroots initiative
- Recognising how different things were in the past, including the way people think and act, opens up the range of possibilities for debate by suggesting pathways are likely to be considered differently in the future too
- Carefully contextualising analogies drawn between past, present and future will improve the quality of public debate by testing the validity of any precedents evoked in justifying a course of action now.

Other historians develop these points, adding that:³

- Issues arise through multiple processes and determining factors. Rather than asking, 'what's the problem', historical perspective asks, 'what's the story?'
- Respect for context and contingency provides an antidote to silver bullet solutions and simple policy fixes – interventions encounter complex and sometimes strong historical forces
- Considering relations of power, inequality, conflict and negotiation in the past suggests we should not gloss over them now, but fully consider their

¹ John Tosh (2008) *Why history matters*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, p.22.

² See also www.historyandpolicy.org

³ C.A.Bayly, Vijayendra Rao, Simon Szreter and Michael Woolcock (eds.) (2011) *Historians, history and development: a necessary dialogue*, University of Manchester Press, Manchester.

presence and influence (in enabling ways that provide the power in the grassroots to innovate, as well as limiting ways in terms of power over grassroots innovation)

- Popular myths and unquestioned assumptions about received wisdoms can be interrogated – revealing whose interests are served by selective interpretations of past evidence.

Overall then, our case studies, as well as studies by others, provide a series of vantage points from which to address issues for promoting grassroots innovation. It allows debate to consider present initiatives more openly, aware that things might have turned out differently, and will probably do so in the future. At the same time, any recurring patterns indicate fundamental features that that will be harder to change and trajectories more likely to persist, even if the precise timescales are unknowable. In either case, the long-view can improve the strategic choices available.

However, historians widely concede that the past is open to interpretation, because even the most incontrovertible of facts are open to judgements as to their consequences.⁴ Different histories, and not History, shape our thinking about the present and our views on the future. The differences and similarities in understandings, debates and responses to varied grassroots innovation movements nevertheless reminds us that these matters are never fully settled.

It is our view that these debates are rarely purely open and deliberative exercises, but that it is wise to try and make them as democratic as possible. This is a view formed through our personal engagement with sustainability issues and politics over the last thirty or more years. Antagonisms will drive the open-ended contestation between different sustainability pathways. A critical historical perspective can challenge assumptions propagated by the powerful about the naturalness or immutability of our situation. Mobilising precedents from the past can inform and help address any fears over the apparent novelty of future changes.⁵

As such, case studies from different places and pasts can become a resource that people can draw upon in thinking through our current predicaments and possibilities. Considering how people address similar social problems in different places and over time becomes an important methodology for critical debates about our future. Plurality in perspective is one way of broadening the terms and quality of debate: its merit rests in opening rather than in closing questions, in facilitating and sharpening debate. In its own small way, we hope the workshop will contribute a little to that goal.

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⁴ Richard J. Evans (1997) *In defence of history*, Granta, London.

⁵ Hearn, F. (1975) Remembrance and critique: the uses of the past for discrediting the present and anticipating the future, *Politics & Society*, 5, 2: 201-227.