



Symposium on Exploring Pathways to Sustainability

February 10 – 11, 2014



CONCEPT NOTE: GRASSROOTS INNOVATION **(SESSION 4: FEB 11, 9.00A.M-11.00A.M)**

Theme: Grassroots Innovation Movements Contribution to Sustainability Pathways

Both internationally and nationally, renewed concern for inclusion in development has recently returned high-level attention to grassroots innovation. Countries in South Asia have a long tradition of grassroots innovation, including not just innovators, but also networks, organisations and movements dedicated to supporting grassroots ingenuity and ensuring it plays its role in development.

Innovations involving the grassroots take on a variety of forms, and we want to ensure presentation and discussion keeps this diversity and breadth in view:

- Artefacts (e.g. specific artefacts, such as water-cooled fridges, or portable milling machines);
- Methodologies (e.g. participatory design, regional network-building, entrepreneurship);
- Actors (e.g. grassroots entrepreneurs, innovation scouts, developers);
- Infrastructure and facilities (e.g. prototyping support, design expertise, databases);
- Policies (e.g. prizes, funds);
- Agendas (e.g. for knowledge production, whether commons-based or proprietary).

High-level interest has enabled countries like India and Nepal to pioneer new ways of engaging policy, scientific and business in the promotion of grassroots innovation. Whilst providing opportunities for some of the above forms of innovation to flourish, these encounters between the grassroots and conventional development and innovation institutions can also introduce tensions. We are keen for discussion to reflect on the politics of grassroots innovation for sustainability. It might be the politics within grassroots innovation initiatives, or between grassroots innovation initiatives and more conventional institutions of innovation.

Aim

Questions about sustainable development are present in some of these histories and developments, but not exclusively. And so the aim in our session is to draw on the wealth of grassroots innovation experience, and relate it to the sustainability theme of the symposium.

Consequently, the overarching question for our session is:

- *How are grassroots innovation movements contributing to sustainability pathways?*

Themes

In attempting this, we introduce two challenges that STEPS research has identified in grassroots innovation:

1. How can grassroots innovations for sustainability scale-up without losing sight of their context-sensitivity?

There is often pressure on grassroots innovators to demonstrate their worth through scaling-up their novel device, technique, service or idea, and to demonstrate its attraction at a multiplicity of locations. One approach has been the provision of assistance for the commercialisation and marketing of the innovation. Another approach has been to build the innovation into development programmes through the creation of broader organisations and networks dedicated to spreading the innovation. In either case, some of the capabilities, skills, and meanings attached to the originating initiative can become lost or transformed. The kinds of actor involved alter too. Some grassroots innovators can even be antithetical to ideas about 'scaling-up' because the generative goals get lost in these scaling and diffusion processes. Other problem – what makes innovation work in one place are absent in other places ...

2. How can grassroots innovation for sustainability connect with broader and deeper processes of development?

Grassroots innovation movements both emerge from and engage with broader social changes and goals; as well as working with institutions in order to achieve their aims. Grassroots innovation can consequently become emblematic for efforts to promote more sustainable food, accessible energy services, better quality shelter, water and sanitation, mobility, local production and so forth. Grassroots innovation activists can find themselves working with institutions that include science, business, policy, and NGOs. Such connections can open up resources and opportunities, but they also introduce new power relations, agendas and challenges too.