



Review

Learning, transformative action, and grassroots innovation: Insights from the Spanish energy cooperative Som Energia



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ABSTRACT

Grassroots innovations for sustainability are attracting increasing attention in academic, activist and policy debate. Although there is a recognition of their transformative potential, very little research has specifically been conducted on how transformative perspectives, strategies and actions emerge. This paper explores the role of learning in promoting transformative strategies towards sustainability. We develop a heuristic framework connecting ideas from social learning literature and Strategic Niche Management and address the case of Som Energia, the first renewable energy cooperative in Spain. Our results found that micropolitical and macropolitical factors are drivers that influence the emergence of first- and second-order learning. In turn, this learning moulds three different strategies proposed by this grassroots initiative, namely: commercial, social, and empowering strategies. Our results give insights to illustrate that, in order to develop radical transformative changes towards sustainability it is not enough to merely scale-up the regime (commercial strategy) or make sustainable and social proposals (social strategy), unless these aims are achieved through an empowering process that transforms our current values and relations (empowering strategy).

1. Introduction

New social innovations to deal with the sustainability challenges society is facing are continuously emerging in different realms. Although the most visible of them are focused on technological proposals and developed by traditional incumbent private sector organisations or public institutions, civil society organisations are also experimenting with innovative practical proposals and playing an important role in the development of sustainable practices. These civil society initiatives have been conceptualised as *grassroots innovations* (GIs) [1] and can be defined as “(n)etworks of activists and organisations generating novel bottom-up solutions for sustainable development” ([1], p.585). They have been studied in relation to a great variety of topics, such as community energy projects, community food networks, community currencies, sustainable housing, local material recycling or community-based water and sanitation [2–4].

In these debates, some scholars have focused on the transformative dimension of some GIs. They underscore the fact that, in some cases,

GIs not only build and explore alternative and more sustainable models in different realms and systems, but also propose more just and democratic models, through innovation processes which are led by people's needs and aspirations [5]. In this line, some scholars have recently tried to examine the exact meaning of *transformation* [3–6]. They have developed research to better characterise transformative grassroots initiatives, addressing how they are mobilising citizens' values [7] and contributing to more just societies (coined, in Smith et al. [8] as grassroots innovation movements; and in Pellicer-Sifres et al. [5] as grassroots social innovation for human development). They agree that GIs are transformative when they deliberately and effectively pursue justice as a key aim.¹ However, despite the interest and importance of the transformative dimension of GIs, research has essentially focused on the definition and sense of *transformation*. No research has specifically been conducted on how transformative perspectives, strategies and actions emerge.

Most authors have studied grassroots innovations from Strategic Niche Management literature (SNM), in order to understand how niches

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¹ Note that this is not the case of all initiatives found under the GI label: from literature to sustainability transition, we found cases of GIs that pursue sustainability or the interests of a specific group of people. We base this paper on our previous work and stance on what a transformative GI is [5], and we are especially interested in exploring those grassroots initiatives which, apparently, mobilise people, reframe citizen's values and contribute to just societies. From hereon, we will refer to them as Grassroots Social Movements.

and initiatives strategise, act, and develop in relation with their aims (for a systematic review, see Hossain [9]). In this strand of research, a Multi-Level Perspective has proved useful for contextualising SNM and providing a deeper understanding of how the socio-technical proposals of GIs change over time.

The research has also focused on niche-internal processes, in order to understand how learning emerges at the core of the initiative and its contribution to niche development [10–13]. This research has identified that “*most learning will contribute to niche development if it is not only directed at the accumulation of facts and data, i.e., first-order learning, but also enable changes in cognitive frames and assumptions, i.e., second-order learning*” Schot and Geels ([10], p. 541). However, to the author’s knowledge, no specific research has been found on understanding the role of learning in relation to transformative change.

It is reasonable to suppose that this second-order learning is key for transformative developments, for this reason authors such as Mezirow [14], name it “transformative learning”. However, these questions have not been further explored, either in SNM and MLP literature or in grassroots social movement research—which is quite surprising given the aspirations to bring about transformative development present in these literatures.

The aim of the paper, then, is to address the shortcomings mentioned and explore how transformative change takes place through learning in grassroots innovations. In more specific terms, the aim is to explore which drivers and which (first- and second-order) learning results in grassroots initiatives that are relevant to promoting transformative strategies to sustainability.

To explore these topics, we connect the aforementioned ideas on SNM and MLP with some ideas from critical learning literature. We consider insights from Learning in Social Action (LSA) discussions, as long as they focus on informal and incidental learning in social struggles and political activity [15]. We complement this with ideas on transformative learning from Mezirow [14], as they may be relevant for understanding the different levels and the transformative nature of some learning. Through the connection of these discussions with SNM and MLP literature we build a heuristic framework to help us better understand how to characterise the space where learning emerges; what the drivers that motivate its appearance are, and what outcomes emerge.

To address the aim of the paper, we will explore the niche of the citizens’ energy movement in Spain, in particular, the case of the grassroots initiative Som Energia—the first green energy cooperative—which has a remarkable spirit of activism and social mobilisation. This research was conducted during the period of 2014–2016 using a purely qualitative methodology, based on a mixture of techniques including in-depth document analysis, semi-structured interviews, participant observation and participation as active members of the cooperative.

The paper is organised as follows: in Section 2 we provide theoretical basic concepts of LSA, SNM, MLP and grassroots social movements literature, and connect them in order to propose a theoretical framework. Section 3 presents the case study, and Section 4 explains the methodology used to gather and analyse the information. In Section 5, we discuss the key findings on the drivers of learning processes (5.1); and we explore the outcomes of learning (5.2) by characterising this learning and connecting it with three different strategies proposed by the grassroots initiative, thus highlighting some reflections on its transformative character. Finally, in Section 6, we present some concluding remarks on our study.

2. Theoretical background

Although learning has been highlighted in SNM literature as a relevant aspect in order to understand how alternative framings that confront the current regime are generated [11,16,10]; only a handful of studies have explored it and characterised it in depth. To deal with this

shortcoming, we use theoretical insights from literature in adult education on the topic on Learning in Social Action in order to characterise where learning emerges, what the drivers are, and what outcomes result.

Learning has been looked at from various disciplines and angles, including cognitive psychology, social psychology, (adult) education studies, management studies, innovation studies, policy science studies, development studies and complex systems thinking [17]. Among them, and for the purposes of this article, we choose to discuss learning from one specific literature within the field of adult education, which is the one on the topic on “Learning in Social Action”. It is inspired by authors such as Foley, Holst, Hall, Chaudry, Margaret or Steinklammer, who focus particularly on the processes of *learning in people’s struggles*, through participation in a social movement or NGO, in hegemonic practices, in resistance experiences, that is to say, “through the involvement in social action”. We are especially interested in the incidental learning processes arising from and contributing to engagement in social struggles.

These topics and interests are not exactly those dealt by authors from social learning literature, such as Bandura, Argyris and Schön. For example Bandura [18] focused on explaining how individuals learn from society from a cognitive perspective of learning influenced by context and social norms; [19], from an organisational management perspective, were less focused on individual learning and more on how group learning occurs and how it can be dynamically structured and facilitated.

From our literature review of the many approaches to adult learning, we considered Learning in Social Action to be an inspiring literature on which to develop our theoretical point of view, due to the fact that our research is based on one specific type of GIs: those grassroots social movements that can be considered as social organisations of citizens involved in democratic action for social change. Although, as Hossain [9] acknowledges, there is a huge spectrum of experiences with different characteristics, aims, challenges, and achieved outputs, in this paper we focus on those grassroots initiatives that can be considered to be engaged in social action.

LSA literature argues that involvement in social action and struggle itself becomes a form of adult learning—dynamic, incidental and resistance learning—in which people unlearn dominant oppressive discourses and instead learn oppositional, liberatory ones. Foley’s book [15] makes a vital contribution to theorising and making explicit these incidental learning processes arising from and contributing to engagement in a range of social struggles, recognising its importance, its complexity, its non-neutrality and its unavoidable link with ethical judgements and choices. Based on this definition, adult learning in processes of social action can be described as emergent, informal, non-planned, tacit and incidental, based on dynamic relationships, and embedded in power relations [20].

Holst [21] remarks that through a participation in a social movement, people learn numerous skills and ways of thinking analytically and strategically as they struggle to understand their movement in motion. “*As coalitions are formed people’s understanding of interconnectedness of relations within a social totality become increasingly sophisticated*” ([21], pp. 87–88). This learning takes place through relationships, in permanent and dynamic processes, embedded in particular contexts, where social, political, economic and cultural factors are at play [22].

2.1. The space: grassroots social movements as key spaces for learning in social action

Grassroots Social Movements are based on civil society forms of organisation that include a broad diversity of social actors, who interact with each other through collaboration, mobilisation, self-organisation and self-recognition, often basing their relationship on new arrangements that differ from formal institutions (horizontal structures,

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