

Paper Session

[I18] Legitimacy creation in grassroots innovations. An empirical study into community supported agriculture in the Netherlands

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Global societal challenges, such as climate change and food security, emphasise the need for more sustainable modes of production and consumption in various sectors. Current strategies tackling these challenges reflect the dominance of market-driven technological innovations. This top-down approach designates a key role for firms in the innovation process and regards citizens as passive agents. More recently, civil society-led bottom-up grassroots initiatives are recognised as a significant societal movement, with the potential to shape transition pathways towards sustainability. Such grassroots responses are especially apparent in those sectors where problems are intensifying, existing models are failing and new possibilities are not adequately exploited (Seyfang et al., 2007, 2013; Taylor Aiken, 2012; de Vries et al., 2016).

The agro-food sector is familiar with high grassroots activity, since sustainability issues have become increasingly important (Kirwan et al., 2013; White and Stirling, 2012). Here, bottom-up responses of civic society aim to counterbalance 'big food' developments (e.g. Levidow, 2015). Farmers have seen their added value being captured by retailers and are looking for alternative ways of surviving. Conversely, consumers have become estranged from farming and have increasing demands regarding the quality, traceability and environmental friendliness of food products and processes (e.g. Elzen et al., 2012). To challenge industrialised food systems, farmers and consumers have united in local food networks based on alternative values, principles, business models and organisational patterns (Kneafsey et al., 2013). In particular, these initiatives set-up communities around growing and consumption of food and endeavour to re-connect consumers and producers; and re-localize agricultural production. Grassroots food communities include solidarity buying groups of local food; community supported agriculture and collective urban gardening initiatives.

Grassroots initiatives provide alternative spaces to dominant practices within wider unsustainable regimes (e.g. Hargreaves et al., 2013; Seyfang and Longhurst, 2016). As such, grassroots innovations often face a mismatch regarding existing systems of norms, values and beliefs. Consequently, founders of such unconventional activities need to cope with 'liability of newness'. In particular, innovating entrepreneurs need to engage in efforts to get the innovation accepted as a desirable, realistic and appropriate i.e. *legitimate* alternative to incumbent substitutes in order for resources to be mobilised, for demand to form and to acquire regulatory support (e.g. Aldrich and Fiol, 1994). This paper sets out to open-up and understand legitimacy creation in grassroots innovation. Grassroots initiatives will have to constitute itself and attract members; they will have to raise funds and secure permission to operate. Throughout, they have to safeguard commitment and solidarity of their members. Principally, grassroots communities need to cultivate support and legitimacy locally. However, if they wish to endure and be influential, the initiative will need to seek approval from wider society. As grassroots innovation usually stems from the knowledge and experience of actors outside the formal institutions responsible for innovation, 'being taken seriously' is a fundamental issue when trying to create momentum (Smith et al., 2015). This paper aims to understand the role of grassroots actors and strategic action to get the innovation accepted as a realistic and desirable alternative to incumbent substitutes (Bergek et al., 2008). The theoretical roots of this contribution draw on legitimacy types and legitimation strategy distinctions made within organisational sociology (Suchman, 1995). The following research question will be addressed: *How does legitimacy creation occur in grassroots innovations? More specifically: What type of legitimacy is sought and which legitimation strategies are used to acquire these legitimacy types?*

The research design is an exploratory case study of Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) in the Netherlands. Around 46 Dutch CSA grassroots initiatives are known (Urgenci, 2016). CSA refers to a partnership between one or more farmers and a community of members (Flora et al., 2012). CSA in the Netherlands presents a bottom-up induced niche in the highly industrialised Dutch agro-food system associated with numerous regulations and consolidation of economic power. Hence, it is expected that grassroots actors in the CSA niche need to engage in legitimacy creation to convince potential members, policy makers, the broader industry and special interest group of the desirability and necessity of CSA. We aim to explore legitimacy creation in Dutch CSAs by means of 20-25 interviews, and comparing them via synthesising patterns in legitimacy creation of the individual CSAs. This paper provides insights into a novel system of food provisioning based on bottom-up, community-led innovation processes. While innovation studies has extensively studied legitimacy at the level of technological innovations and industries, studies into the dynamics of legitimacy creation of grassroots innovations are scarce and expected to enhance theoretical understandings on grassroots survival.