

# Top 10 Grassroots Movements That Are Taking on the World

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Waiting for political change to come about once every few years at election time is not only frustrating, but is an almost sure-fire way of ensuring that the changes you really want don't get delivered within the time frames that are necessary.

If we really want to see change, then to paraphrase Gandhi, we have to be the change. Grassroots movements offer up a multitude of creative and inspiring ways for ordinary folks to get involved in changemaking, both from the bottom up, and as a conversation space through which we can come to terms with our own power to make a difference. Although grassroots efforts may not be mirrored in party politics, the effects resonate at the broadest possible level, shaping resilient futures and empowering communities.

Here's a quick run-down of ten of the most inspiring movements that are taking on the system, and winning:

## 10. Syriza

Who are they? Initially an alliance representing the labour, environmental and feminist movements, the Coalition of the Radical Left in Greece are emblematic of grassroots political success. Syriza's historic election win in January 2015 is a classic example of turning crisis into opportunity. What do they want? To force an end to the modern Greek tragedy of austerity, poverty, unemployment, debt and economic recession via political and economic restructuring.

Who/what are they fighting? Predatory lending and austerity measures imposed by the 'Troika' - the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

How do they organise? Syriza is a coalition of political groups and independent politicians. Its role as the new national government gives it an official mandate to roll out policies, enabling more rapid change than could be achieved by grassroots organizing alone.

Success stories: On 26<sup>th</sup> January 2015 Syriza formed government in Greece. But the road ahead for the radical party will not be smooth, with plans for political and economic restructuring being met with hostility by the EU in spite of their popularity among Greek citizens.

## 9. Permaculture

Who are they? A loose-knit network of groups and individuals who share an understanding of ecological systems and a passion for regenerative design that nurtures the earth while providing for humankind.

What do they want? A sustainable future of earth stewardship in which we are all responsible for maintaining a sustainable biosphere.

The core tenets of permaculture include care for the earth, care for the people, and return of surplus production back into the system. In practice this involves maintaining a healthy environment – without which humans cannot flourish; providing access to the resources necessary for human survival; and ensuring that all would-be waste is transformed or recycled into something useful.

Who/what are they fighting? Permaculture is a piecemeal fight against a destructive social and environmental system of coercive political and corporate control. As more permaculture practitioners join the movement, the system is weakened and replaced with something more sustainable, in small steady steps.

How do they organise? The permaculture movement is about as decentralised as it gets, with most practitioners putting their time into practical action in their own communities, and most organized activities involving practical projects such as localized food production.

Success stories: Successes of the permaculture movement largely involve incorporation of its principles in other movements and organisations, such as the Transition Towns movement, and the food sovereignty movement.

## **8. The anti-coal seam gas movement**

Who are they? A diverse array of farmers, First Nations peoples, conservationists and urban residents.

What do they want? Clean, healthy land and water, and the right for their community to say no to destructive extractive industry.

Who/what are they fighting? The destruction of land, water and community by the coal-seam gas industry.

How do they organise? The anti-CSG movement is decentralized, but organisations have sprung up to assist in the form of networking, organizing, and advocacy hubs, such as Australia's Lock the Gate Alliance.

Success stories: The anti-CSG movement has had hundreds of major wins, far too many to count – from Australia's northern rivers declaration of freedom from CSG, the success of the Bentley Blockade in chasing frackers Metgasco out of town, to Poland's year-long 'Occupy Chevron' blockade that forced the gas giant into retreat, to four countries officially outlawing fracking: France, Bulgaria, Germany and Scotland.

## **7. Podemos**

Who are they? A left-wing political party in Spain, formed in 2014 from the protest movement (Los Indignados) that emerged to address the post-GFC political and economic climate in Spain. Podemos translates into English as 'we can.'

What do they want? Podemos' goals are to heal the economy, promote liberty, equality and fraternity, redefine sovereignty, and recover land from extractive and exploitive industry.

Notable policies include a universal basic income, corporate tax-avoidance prevention, withdrawal from some free trade agreements, referenda on major constitutional reforms, reduction of fossil fuel consumption, promotion of public transport and renewable energy, and stimulus of local food production by small and medium enterprises.

Who/what are they fighting? Much like Syriza in Greece, Podemos seek to address poverty, inequality and unemployment, and renegotiate austerity measures.

How do they organise? In order to establish a functioning political party, Podemos set themselves three conditions: to gather the support of at least 50,000 party members, to develop their policies and organisational structure through open participation with citizens' assemblies, and to seek unity with other parties of the left and leftist social movements. The 50,000 member signatures were gathered within less than 24 hours.

Success stories: It's early days for Podemos, but successes include their rapid rise to the position of Spain's second largest political party, with more than 170,000 official members.

## **6. Sovereign Union of First Nations Peoples (Australia)**

Who are they? First Nations peoples from communities across Australia, and their supporters.

What do they want? Freedom from colonial bondage, and nothing less, is what many Australian First Nations Peoples are striving for in their advance toward a treaty that returns to them what was so brutally taken from them: sovereignty.

Australia's First Nation peoples have never ceded sovereignty, and fight to this day for the right to live true to their own cultural vision. Sovereignty is about taking total responsibility, self-determination and self-sufficiency. Instead of being dependent on a system of exploitation, the twin pillars of freedom and responsibility are the essence of sovereignty.

Who/what are they fighting? Colonial oppression from an occupying force (the Australian government).

How do they organise? The sovereign rights movement is a decentralized network of Indigenous rights activists, elders and community leaders who have formed a sovereign union for the advancement of a treaty. The union is attended by representatives from across the continent.

Success stories: In 2012 the National Unity Government of the Sovereign Union of First Nations Peoples in Australia was established, and the Act of Sovereign Union between First Nations Peoples in Australia was formally recognized by signatories. A number of Sovereign Embassies have since been established across the continent.

## **5. Rights of Nature**

Who are they? A network of individuals and organisations representing a diverse array of scientists, lawyers, indigenous leaders, politicians, students and activists.

What do they want? Universal adoption and implementation of legal systems that respect and enforce the rights of nature.

The Rights of Nature movement calls for recognition of rights for forests, oceans, rivers, mountains, and animals, just as for human beings. While globalised industrial culture views nature as a collection of resources from which to meet human needs and extract profit, the rights of nature movement holds that nature has the right to exist, persist, maintain and regenerate its vital cycles.

Who/what are they fighting?

Extractive industry, polluters, and destructive developers.

How do they organise? Various facets of the movement perform various functions in the struggle for recognition of rights of nature, from legal advocacy to educational events to earth rights days of action.

Success stories: It may seem a tall order to get legal recognition for the rights of nature, but inroads have been made, with Ecuador and Bolivia currently naming the rights of nature in their respective constitutions.

#### **4. Food Sovereignty**

Who are they? A collaborative network of organisations and individuals – largely small-scale food producers and permaculture practitioners – working together towards the goal of food sovereignty for all.

What do they want? A fair, diverse, equitable, resilient, sustainable and democratic food system that is accessible to everyone.

Who/what are they fighting? Although food sovereignty activists are focused on creating an alternative model rather than fighting the existing reality, they are effectively combating corporate agribusiness by reclaiming and democratising food production.

How do they organise? The food sovereignty movement is a loose network of organisations and individuals, with inclusivity, transparency, and collaboration as core organisational tenets.

Success stories: Food sovereignty movement successes are a work of stealth, with cultural acceptance of new norms and practices creeping into society from the bottom up. Some organisations such as the Open Food Network are established on food sovereignty principles, while the steady growth in farmers' markets, community gardening, and local food initiatives demonstrate widespread assimilation of food sovereignty principles.

#### **3. La Via Campesina**

Who are they? 200 million farmers, peasants, the landless dispossessed, and indigenous populations from 73 countries.

What do they want? Sovereignty, social justice and dignity.

The movement's main goals are to establish food sovereignty, and put an end to the destructive neoliberal global trade best characterized in treaties such as the Trans-Pacific Partnership. The movement also defends women's rights and gender equality against neoliberalism and patriarchy.

Who/what are they fighting? Corporate agribusiness, neoliberalism and patriarchy

How do they organise? In reflection of its political values, La Via Campesina is a decentralized movement that is organized at local and national levels, with one female and one male representative locally elected to represent each of the regions on the international coordinating committee.

Success stories: La Via Campesina is now recognized as a key global voice representing agroecology in dialogue around sustainable agriculture. The movement's voice is heard by institutions such as the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the UN Human Rights Council.

#### **2. Climate Justice**

Who are they? A network of groups and individuals from across the globe who are committed to realising socially just and environmentally responsible solutions to the climate crisis.

What do they want? Climate justice in the form of solutions that do not place unreasonable burdens on poor countries and disadvantaged populations, recognizing historical responsibility for the climate crisis.

Key goals of the climate justice movement are to leave fossil fuels in the ground, while investing in appropriate energy efficiency and community-led renewable energy programs; reduction in wasteful consumption; repayment of climate debts from the global North to the global South; compensation for adaptation and mitigation costs – including debt cancellation; rights-based resource conservation; Indigenous land rights and sovereignty; and sustainable agriculture that emphasises food sovereignty.

Who/what are they fighting? Injustices both past and present, and the false solutions proposed by governments, financial institutions and multinational corporations that will only further entrench inequality without significantly impacting emissions.

How do they organise? The movement organises via a network of representatives from the various member groups and organisations who attend strategy meetings and comprise dedicated working groups.

Success stories: The climate justice movement has been given a voice at global climate talks such as the Conference of Parties (COP) negotiations, although its voice clearly lacks the clout of first world governments, financial institutions and powerful corporations.

## **1. Degrowth**

So we may be a little biased in listing degrowth as our #1, but we can't help but feel proud of the poetic irony of a rapidly growing movement for degrowth!

Who are they? A loose-knit alliance of organisations, groups and individuals working toward economic degrowth via various practical projects and educational initiatives.

What do they want? The downscaling of material production and consumption to within sustainable limits.

The means of achieving degrowth tend to be celebratory and inclusive rather than martyrdom through sacrifice. Participation in degrowth can take many forms, including the sharing economy, downshifting, tiny house living, locavorism, and the joys of living simply. The ongoing goal is to shrink one's own ecological footprint, and to join with communities that proactively do more with less.

Who/what are they fighting? Environmental destruction and social inequality, which are both products of today's dominant economic growth-at-all-costs paradigm.

Resource depletion and environmental destruction result from our increasing ecological footprint in the face of limits to growth. Degrowthers recognize that since one cannot fight the limits mother nature imposes and expect to win, our systems of production and consumption that are currently growth-dependent need to change.

How do they organise? Degrowth is organised on many different levels, from individual actions to participation in practical group activities and educational events, to large-scale international

conferences for collaboration and cross-pollination of ideas and projects.

Success stories: Degrowth is still evolving as a movement that is gaining traction against the economic growth ideology primarily among laypeople, rather than from within the political arena. Although still in its infancy, it is quite possible that many of the successes of the degrowth movement will come from being inclusive, proactive, and prepared for the inevitability of deep social and economic adjustments to environmental limits that will have to be made one way or another.

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