

# What does 'grassroots' mean, anyway?



**Grassroots** means coming from, led by, and accountable to the people most impacted by a problem.

In the case of our ecological crisis, **those most impacted are frontline communities or those bearing the brunt of the impacts from extractive industries** and most directly affected by climate chaos, often Indigenous Peoples, women, peasant farmers, and youth.

**Grassroots organizing** has been a central strategy of almost every major social and economic transformation in world history. It builds people power and creates change across geographies and sectors.



**Grassroots is distinct from 'grasstops' organizations in terms of the roles they play, how they are governed, and to whom they are accountable.**

There is overlap with movement-support organizations, but grasstops often have a bigger mic and less accountability (e.g., local political figures).



**Structure:** Grassroots groups can have formal or informal structures (e.g., they may be legally registered or be housed within another organization). Their structures are often dynamic and change to meet current realities and contexts.



**Reach:** Grassroots groups can be local, national, regional, and international; and they can work within movements or outside of them. At whatever scale, grassroots groups are accountable to communities.



**Size:** Grassroots can mean small, volunteer-run groups or larger organizations with more developed infrastructure, paid staff, and centralized or decentralized leadership.



**Scope:** Grassroots groups often work with myriad, sophisticated strategies on systems change and power.

## EXAMPLES

### REFORM THE SYSTEM

#### Grassroots groups rally public support to elect public officials

A staff member of the **Peasant Committee of the Highlands in Guatemala** was elected to congress, with a deep history and ties with the Indigenous movement, in 2016.

#### Grassroots groups write and pass legislation and policy

The **Women's Association for the Development of Sacatepéquez in Guatemala** won their rights to ancestral intellectual property of Indigenous Mayan weaving designs and clothing.

#### Grassroots groups advocate for and secure human rights and environmental protections

In 2019, **Save Lamu in Kenya** helped prevent the construction of the country's first coal fired power plant when a tribunal influenced by Save Lamu's awareness-building efforts found that the government had breached the law in approving the project without an environmental impact assessment.

### CHALLENGE THE SYSTEM

#### Grassroots groups hold governments accountable to law/policy or resist unjust law/policy

In Malaysia, logging and the construction of mega-dams are increasing, ignoring "Free, Prior, and Informed Consent" laws protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples. After winning a landmark victory in the courts to punish violators, grassroots groups **Sahabat Alam Malaysia and the Borneo Project** continue to map violations to ensure protections.

#### Grassroots groups build a popular base to shift political will

The **National Federation of Peasant, Artisan, Indigenous, Native and Wage-earning Women of Peru** organizes actions outside national congress and secures commitments from elected officials to integrate a gender lens into climate policies.

#### Grassroots groups move popular culture to oppose injustice and oppression

Over **300 Indigenous nations** traveled to Standing Rock to resist the Dakota Access Pipeline and galvanize people globally to oppose the industrial assault on local land, waterways, and Indigenous Peoples' rights.

#### Grassroots groups oppose moral wrongs, & protect people and planet where the state fails to do so

**Herder organizations in Mongolia**, Oyu Togol Watch and Gobi Soil, opposed one of the largest mining companies in the world that threatened their water and traditional herding grounds - and won.

### REIMAGINE THE SYSTEM

#### Grassroots groups provide direct services and change material conditions where the state neglects, excludes, or threatens community well-being.

The **Landless Workers Movement in Brazil** has reclaimed land the size of Massachusetts on which they sustainably produce healthy food for dispossessed people.

#### Grassroots groups create or uplift alternative economic and/or governance structures to manage human & ecological communities outside the state

The **Wet'suwet'en Nation in Canada** maintains sovereignty over their territory, upholding traditional relationship and care of lands and water.



**Less than 1% of international giving from the U.S. goes to community-level groups.** Yet, they have an outsized impact on confronting the root causes of the climate crisis and social inequities, and building sustainable futures.



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