# Chapter 24
# *'Net'* Social Change:
## Grassroots Empowerment for Sustainable Development

**Subas P. Dhakal**
*Curtin University, Australia*

## ABSTRACT

*The notion of empowerment broadly refers to the ability of actors to fulfil their missions. However, assessing Information and Communication Technology (ICT) specific contributions to this remains an exigent task in the context of grassroots organizations. The objective of this chapter is to analyse the differences in levels of empowerment between ICT adopters and non-adopters Grassroots Environmental Organizations (GEOs) in Perth, Western Australia. The chapter draws on organizational empowerment theory and proposes an evaluation framework to assess ICT-mediated empowerment for sustainable development. Utilizing a survey of GEOs and interviews with leaders, the chapter unravels the contributions of ICTs in enabling these grassroots actors. The chapter ends with the discussion on the need for overcoming digital divide and recommends strategic support for GEOs that are either not able to or not willing to keep up with the emerging trend of ICTs.*

## INTRODUCTION

Grassroots sustainable development initiatives have been considered to be more effective at the regional scale because regions are large enough for federal and state authorities to deal with, yet small enough for community based actors and local governments to participate in the decision-making process (Dore & Woodhill, 1999; Lawrence, 2005). The basic premise of the notion of sustainable development is that centralized and fragmented emphasis on economic-growth at the expense of social and/or environmental costs is eventually detrimental to the overall societal well-being. The very essence of this notion has inspired various grassroots actors to mobilize themselves to bring about social change to reverse the trend of escalating environmental degradation around the world. For instance, Australia has been dependent on thousands of Grassroots Environmental Organizations (GEOs) across the country in order to safeguard local environment. This is done through activities that range from conserving threatened

biodiversity to restoring degraded habitats in the regions like Perth, capital city of Western Australia, where two-thirds of native ecosystems have been lost in the past 150 years (Davis & Froend, 1999; Stenhouse, 2004; Dhakal, 2014a).

On the one hand, GEOs operate in challenging circumstances because of the lack of a) availability or access to adequate funds and volunteers, b) capacity to forge partnerships with other actors, and c) certainty over long-term viability to accomplish organizational missions (Simpson & Clifton, 2010; Tennent & Lockie, 2013; Dhakal, 2015). On the other hand, despite being under-resourced and volunteer-dependent, GEOs are often considered reliable partners by governmental and non-governmental organizations in terms of bringing about social change for sustainable development (Smith, 2000; Anheier, 2005). Consequently, the role that Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs), for example, the Internet and Internet based tools play is important in enabling GEOs' driven environmental stewardship initiatives. In recent years, this role has been increasingly acknowledged around the world (Kutner, 2000; Burt & Taylor, 2003; Horton, 2004; Hawken, 2007; Dhakal, 2011). It is in this context that an important question of 'To what extent do ICTs enable grassroots actors to become significantly empowered?' is critical. This question forms the basis of discussion in this chapter.

The theoretical conjecture that links ICT-mediated empowerment and GEOs proposes that empowered grassroots actors are better equipped to undertake sustainable development initiatives. However, the ways to ascertain empowerment levels, be it those mediated by ICTs or not, remain methodologically difficult. This complexity is partly brought about by the multiple descriptions and dimensions associated with the notion of empowerment. The possibility and practicability of evaluating empowerment may thus become confusing or even controversial. It thus goes without saying that without reliable measurement attempts, the properties and the significance of empowerment will remain obscure. Rappaport (1984) had argued that:

*We must not reify empowerment in the measurement of the end product, or the process, or in a particular intervention or means by which it comes about. That is, the way it is measured is not the thing in itself. Nevertheless, each measurement, intervention, and description in a particular context adds to our understanding of the construct (Rappaport, 1984, p. 4).*

In line with this debate on the reification of empowerment this chapter demonstrates that an attempt to assess empowerment can unravel useful insights. Such an assessment can also help to ascertain if indeed empowered GEOs are in a better position to attain sustainable development objectives and can inform policy interventions. The chapter begins by adopting working definitions of relevant key terms before discussing the main thesis of this chapter as well as the challenges that may be encountered in the process of measuring empowerment levels of GEOs.

## GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS (GEOs)

GEOs are not-for-profit and non-governmental organizations. By nature, they are identified as a part of the "charities", "civil society", "community sector", "voluntary sector" or "third sector" (Lyons, 2001). Based on the description of Australian Taxation Office [ATO], formal or informal organizations that operate at the grassroots to care for the environment (ATO, 2000, p. 49) are referred to as GEOs for the purpose of this chapter. GEOs across the country have been at the forefront of social change for

## Related Content

Application of Machine Learning Algorithms in the Mitigation Phase of Disaster Management: A Review

Elrich Joshua Miranda, Kaushhal Narayanaswami Kumarji, Srilakshmi Ramesan, Thomas Varghese, Vinay V. Panickerand Devendra K. Yadav (2022). *International Journal of Social Ecology and Sustainable Development (pp. 1-13).*

www.irma-international.org/article/application-machine-learning-algorithms-mitigation/292079

Sustainable Development Through Field Vegetal Exploitation in Romania

Mariana Bran, Iuliana Dobreand Stefania Daniela Bran (2019). *Agrifood Economics and Sustainable Development in Contemporary Society (pp. 47-74).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/sustainable-development-through-field-vegetal-exploitation-in-romania/210015

Face Detection And Recognition Through Live Stream

Pardhu Thottempudi (2023). *Sustainable Science and Intelligent Technologies for Societal Development (pp. 167-177).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/face-detection-and-recognition-through-live-stream/330918

Assessing the Effectiveness of Government Initiatives for Financial Inclusion in India

Mahendra R. Mishra (2024). *The Role of Financial Inclusion for Reaching Sustainable Development Goals (pp. 64-75).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/assessing-the-effectiveness-of-government-initiatives-for-financial-inclusion-in-india/339035

A New Barrier for the Future of Energy Market in Turkey: Internal Capital Adequacy Assessment Process (ICAAP)

Esin Okay (2018). *Sustainable Development: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 1585-1603).*

www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-new-barrier-for-the-future-of-energy-market-in-turkey/189960