



[www.globaled.org.nz](http://www.globaled.org.nz)

GEC WEBSITE HOME

RELEVANT LINKS

## FACT SHEET

# GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

### WHAT ARE GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS?

The Concise Oxford Dictionary 2002 defines 'grassroots' as "the most basic level of an activity or organisation; ordinary people regarded as the main body of an organisation's membership." Grassroots Movements (GM's) tend to work from small to large, from the bottom up, and from inside to outside. In contrast, governments and bureaucracies often work at a very large scale, organising and mobilising big groups of people and large sums of money. GM's are also known as non-government organizations (NGOs) and as new social movements. In Aotearoa New Zealand, grassroots organisations are sometimes in the voluntary sector and include activities such as 'meals on wheels' which bring meals to those unable to cook for themselves.

GMs are not usually part of bigger civic bodies such as city councils and government departments. They are not so much concerned with access to state power, as they are with being self-organised and free from control by the state, churches, the market and political institutions. In this way they can become a forum for discussion and an avenue for representation to the state and political institutions. They tend to originate out of a group of people who have a similar perception of an injustice that has occurred, or of circumstances that need to be changed.

GMs can be 'citizens movements' which cover a range of human concerns, from service clubs, churches, self-help and spiritual groups to associations of teachers, musicians, professionals, indigenous rights groups and political organisations. Grassroots Movements can also be organisations concerned with particular issues, often related to human, animal or environmental rights. Globally, they frequently grow out of indigenous and marginalised populations, and can become an expression of discontent and the need for change. GMs are often working with the process of creating freedom: having the ability to make choices about where to live, what to eat, how much education to have, who to vote for and who to associate with. Grassroots Movements will also often have very little by way of resources or income, and in fact will seek change in society due to their concern with how resources are unequally distributed.

Grassroots movements provide an opportunity for defining 'self' and interests. For example a person might become part of a group working on rainforest issues and in the process become a 'greenie'. These movements often start with new names, terms and ideas, which can then enter into the mainstream as they gain popularity. Sometimes this process is very cyclic as new movements enter the mainstream and others take their place. The trade union movement in New Zealand is an example of this, having an ebb and flow according to the political climate.

The Internet has become an increasingly important tool of organization and communication for GMs locally and globally. Through this medium groups are able to exchange information, organise activities and find out what other people are doing. The key here is the speed at which this occurs. An example of an Internet lead and Internet dependant social movement is Indymedia. This group encourages worldwide participation on its website to comment on current events around the world ([www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)).

### SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

- Decentralised leadership and decision-making.
- Direct, participatory democracy.
- Diversity and plurality, aimed at integrating and empowering those most often marginalised: women, indigenous peoples, people of colour, members of minority ethnic groups.
- Values based - including concepts of equity, community and sustainability.
- Organising practices which include flexibility, use of creativity, networking and having a bias towards the most local level of organisation available.



### THREE EXAMPLES OF GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

#### 1. The Water Pressure Group - Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

The Water Pressure Group (WPG) formed in 1997 after Metrowater, a council controlled company, took over Auckland's water and massively increased charges for domestic water and wastewater. With Metrowater in charge, four person households were reporting annual water bills of up to \$1,000. It used to be that water was one of the services covered by household rates but by 2000 47% of councils had started introducing water charges according to how much water was used. The Water Pressure Group encouraged people not to pay their water bills as a form of protest. When Metrowater cut them off, the WPG showed people how to reconnect their water supply so they could keep washing, cooking and having water to drink.

The Water Pressure Group's argument is that water is a public good and should be free to households and not sold as a private economic good. The fight about the Metrowater bills went all the way to the New Zealand High court where a judge ruled that water was a commercial good and that the Commerce Act could be applied to it. This meant that Metrowater had firm legal backing to keep charging for water. The WPG asked the court of Appeal to reconsider the High Court decision but it upheld the ruling. The Water Pressure Group is still going strong, lobbying, protesting and actively promoting civil disobedience against the commercialisation of water.

#### 2. World Social Forum - Everywhere

The World Social Forum is a coming together of people's movements from around the world to discuss and debate alternatives to the neo-liberal experiment in economics. It was first held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, in 2001 and has been held each year since.

A charter of principles has been drawn up to guide the processes of this initiative. The charter embodies the purposes and directions of The World Social Forum. The first principle is "The World Social Forum is an open meeting place for reflective thinking, democratic debate of ideas, formulation of proposals, free exchange of experiences and interlinking for effective action by groups and movements of civil society that are opposed to neo-liberalism and the domination of the world by capital and any form of imperialism, and are committed to building a planetary society directed towards fruitful relationships among mankind and between it and the Earth" ([www.worldsocialforum.org](http://www.worldsocialforum.org)).

The WSF has an organising committee and an international council to ensure the event happens, but a process of self-organising in terms of workshops and agendas occurs at the event itself.

#### 3. Wellington Youth Service Project - 'Evolve', Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand

Wellington Youth Service Project is an exciting project, both in terms of its scope and implementation. This youth owned and youth led initiative is dedicated to establishing a holistic one stop-shop service for the young people of Wellington. This Service is expected to have positive outcomes in the areas of health, employment, justice, civic participation and education.

The Wellington Youth Service Project evolved from a general understanding that most of the services in Wellington were scattered, expensive and not very youth friendly. Often this either prevented young people from seeking help when needed and sometimes made the experience quite unpleasant. It was recognised that there were large gaps, with a lack of coordination and at times misinformation with regards to young people and their issues.

With the help of some professionals and the wider community a group of young people set out to research young people's needs; consult with organisations; identify best practice models; lobby government and the local DHB; set up a legal entity and negotiate funding. Commitment to inclusive working was the key, and apart from a core group of volunteers, over 50 organisations and 2800 people (2000 of which were young people) have contributed to the project in some form. Much work remains to be done, but the service doors have just opened and its highly appropriate name "Evolve" demonstrates an ongoing commitment to youth development and wellbeing. ([www.homepages.paradise.net.nz/evolve/Home.html](http://www.homepages.paradise.net.nz/evolve/Home.html))



[www.globaled.org.nz](http://www.globaled.org.nz)

---

**GEC WEBSITE HOME**

---

**GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS FACT SHEET**

---

**RELEVANT LINKS**

[www.indymedia.org](http://www.indymedia.org)

[www.worldsocialforum.org](http://www.worldsocialforum.org)

[www.homepages.paradise.net.nz/evolve/Home.html](http://www.homepages.paradise.net.nz/evolve/Home.html)