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“Gumboots and Grassroots”

Exploring leadership for social change at a grassroots level in New Zealand

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Abstract

The primary aim of this study was to explore the motivations underpinning three agri-women's involvement in grassroots associations. The research investigated leadership processes within the groups and sought to understand the impact of three specific projects in the context of grassroots leadership for social change.

Grassroots associations have been described as innovative networks of people sharing common goals and vision, that recognise and respond to local community needs, often motivated by a need to create societal and environmental change. Future climatic and sustainability challenges predicted for New Zealand's agri-sector provide the impetus to support and increase this collective leadership capacity.

Voluntary groups such as these have largely been ignored by leadership scholars, however their informal, decentralised structures and collective decision-making processes offer unique opportunities to view leadership in a different way, a way that may be essential in the complex world of the 21st century. Furthermore, the context of this research in rural and provincial New Zealand provides a fresh perspective relevant to rural and urban alike, for a country largely reliant on its primary sector for economic prosperity.

A qualitative multiple case study design was chosen for its ability to achieve a holistic result, rich in content and meaning, through employing multiple data collection techniques in a naturalistic setting. Thematic analysis was used to draw out themes from the data, which combined with existing theory in an abductive approach adding new contributions to the current limited knowledge of grassroots leadership processes.

Key findings were the participants' voluntary altruistic principles and their passion, persistence and commitment to their causes. Leadership processes within the groups confirmed an outdated leader-follower influence paradigm and strong parallels with elements of Complexity Leadership Theory, especially in terms of enabling leadership to create adaptive space. However, the major contribution from this study was an adapted framework demonstrating how philosophical foundations, leadership practices and activities of grassroots associations can build community power in the creation of social capital contributing to community resilience for unknown and unknowable future events.

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