Solutions for sustainability: Emergent mechanisms for locally-situated (dis)organising.

Melissa Edwards, Jenny Onyx

Cosmopolitan Civil Societies, University of Technology, Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

Environmental sustainability issues have no spatial boundaries, they seek to address future environmental uncertainty within development that enables social and intergenerational equity whilst challenging accepted norms of 'business as usual'. Sustainability issues are contested within ‘messy’, ‘underorganised’ domains (Gray, 1999) where the role of civil society and collective action clearly hold a legitimate stake. Examining such ‘messy’ domains, this paper explores how locally situated organising emerges and operates within civil society. Specifically this paper questions how organising occurs in practice within locally situated collective action groups, further determining what processes or mechanisms may enable such organising to emerge. How does locally situated organising spontaneously emerge in relation to the complexity of sustainability issues? How do diverse individuals negotiate and attain collective representation and action?

An exploratory approach is facilitated through grounded case studies within the state of New South Wales in Australia. Three cases are explored as examples of self-formed locally situated collective organising around broad sustainability aims that seek to encompass social justice within ecological constraints. These cases are the Sydney Social Forum, the Green Corridor Coalition and Climate Action Groups.

Data from various sources (participant observations, interviews with key participants, online correspondence and other secondary source information) was triangulated and then assisted through the use of computer software (NVivo 8), using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) techniques. Several overarching aims guided the data analysis: exploring the emergent organising processes, questioning cohesion within networks, representing the outlying information, unpacking the collective notion of ‘movement identity’ and identifying critical turning points. Rather than assuming the locally-based groups formed part of social movement or to presume they are ‘organised’ entities, this paper considers how emergent (dis)organising occurs within the groups.

The organising mechanisms common to these cases are explored within the development of a conceptual framework. The overarching analysis demonstrates the significance of connectivity, both as a metaphor for negotiating diversity, as well as in terms of network-building to enable collective organising. Furthermore, the organising processes within the cases viewed through this complexity thinking lens uncovers paradox in relation to consensus decision-making, collective identity, structuring, leadership and knowledge and communication.

A critical interpretation of dominant schools within social movements and organisation studies provides a basis for investigating complexity thinking as a means for understanding the (dis)organisation of local organising (Chesters & Welsh, 2006; Chia, 1999; Cilliers, 1998; Macquire et al, 2006; Urry, 2002). Complexity thinking situates the local in dynamic interaction within national and global movements seeking solutions for sustainability. (Re)interpretation through this lens of the empirical cases suggests that complexity thinking may be useful in understanding the emergence of locally situated organising as a dynamic and dialectic process of action, interaction, cooperation and contestation. Each case represents a distinct organising process within a diverse situation, yet they incorporate issues of sustainability into their core purpose. Their focus is local, yet they operate within a global nexus. Findings from this study shed light into the mechanisms enabling such self-organising which may be relevant for strengthening the voice of civil society within the ‘messy, contested’ sustainability
domain. Participation in emergent grassroots organising seeking solutions to sustainability issues may create sustainable futures now.

References.


