

Post #1 : What is grassroots education ?

Who am I?

My name is Anthony Brault, I'm 45, I'm French and I live in Brittany. Trained as a socio-cultural facilitator, I've been involved in the creation of a number of public debates, the best-known of which are le porteur de parole, le GrO-DéBaT, les débats mouvants... Co-founder of the first grassroots education cooperative, Le Pavé, known for having invented the gesticulated conference, I have been training and coaching teams in the field of grassroots education since 2007. Self-employed since 2016, I've been working with GRET for the past 4 years, supporting the Copil of the "GRET of Tomorrow" project in 2021, leading the GA 2022, the first Faso Tropics in 2022 and the Tropics, offering a training course every year entitled "Grassroot Education Practices".

A definition that can't be found!

There is no clear definition of the concept of grassroots education. Every book on the subject begins with its own definition... To see what it looks like, here's one, by Alexia Morvan : grassroots education is a set of cultural means, mutual learning processes and inter-influence, aimed at dialectically nurturing critical thinking about social reality and emancipatory practices for social transformation.

The definition of grassroots education that I have repeatedly proposed to GRET is thus a procedural definition of democracy. Conceived by Frank Lepage and Luc Carton, it has the advantage of proposing a **process of education in democracy, through practice**. Here it is: "Is democratic a society that recognizes itself divided, i.e. traversed by contradictions of interests, and that associates each

citizen equally in the expression of these contradictions, the analysis of these contradictions, the deliberation of these contradictions, with a view to arriving at an arbitration".

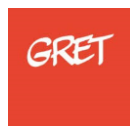
Education for democratic conflict

Grassroot education is thus an **education in conflict resolution**. It's about cooperating to arbitrate the conflicts of interest that divide an organization or a society (cf. the conflicts of use and conflicts of interest that GRET's teams face in their work to facilitate shared governance between the public, the private sector and citizens). It's not innate, and being born into a democracy is far from sufficient to play one's role as a citizen properly !

Democracy can't be taught, it has to be practiced. And when it's not practiced, democracy regresses. For me, grassroots education is the **pedagogy of democracy**. Any process organized by civil society and aimed at deepening democracy can thus be described as grassroots education. Even if the people involved in the process are unaware of the concept !

Grassroot education can therefore be seen as all actions aimed at bringing about, maintaining or reinforcing the democratic dimension of a human organization. It **cannot therefore be top-down**, i.e. driven by the powers that be. At national level, it is not the work of the state, but of civil society. This is why "grassroot¹ education" means "education by the people", unlike national education, which is carried out by the state (or, by contract, on behalf of the state).

¹ In English, we prefer to use « grassroots » than « popular », but both can be used.



We therefore speak of grassroots education as a practice of democracy "from below". Why is it interesting and useful to mobilize it when helping citizens to mobilize within and in favor of shared governance? For example, it is relevant to **mobilize grassroots education in a "commons-based" approach**, which consists of a logic of co-construction of knowledge from below, a "bottom-up" construction of governance, or a citizen mobilization and empowerment approach (making users aware of their ability and power to influence decision-making). There are several operational points of convergence between the commons-based approach and grassroots education.

A little history and geography

Just as a community is built in the face of a social and ecological emergency, a threat or a desire to do things differently, **grassroots education was built on social and political struggles**.

For example, in the early 20th century, in the face of the Church (leading to the 1905 law separating Church and State), in the 1930s in the face of employers (leading to the Front Populaire), and after the Second World War (led by the Conseil National de la Résistance). Or by the feminist and ecological movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Grassroots education is a French concept (some historians place its birth in the French Revolution) that has been adopted. In South America, for example, it was adopted by the *Liberation Theology movement*, where it has retained a much stronger political dimension than in France ! In Belgium, it's known as *permanent education*, in England as *non-formal education* and in the United States as *Community Organizing*.

And today ?

In France, grassroots education movements were recognized by the state after the Second World War - which gave them access to public funding. The sector then became professionalized in the 1960s and 1970s, with trained staff replacing activists in these movements. Grassroots education then gave way to socio-cultural activities.

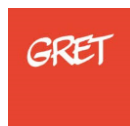
These movements then gradually became state operators in the fields of childhood, sport and culture. The **political dimension** of grassroots education gradually disappeared.

However, there has been talk of a revival of grassroots education since the late 90s, notably through anti-globalization struggles, world social forums, Zapatism, or closer to home, the ZAD experiments, the Gilets Jaunes in France or the #Meetoo and Black Lives Matter social movements around the world.

A fashionable concept

After a long period in the wilderness, grassroots education is now back in vogue, with many associations, trade unions and political parties invoking it as a magic bullet to **democratize organizations that are often still very pyramid-shaped**.

A form of belief in this concept leads people to believe (or to be led to believe) that the use of tools for expression, debate and decision-making, branded as grassroots education, will guarantee respect for democratic values within an organization.



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Unfortunately, this is not the case : tools are not magic, and working on conflict within an organization means, among other things, analyzing the practice of power. And power often tends to set limits to this desire for democracy: using more participative tools, yes, but questioning power, no!

The view that "tools are not enough, because the approach is above all political" is also a **point in common with the commons-based approach...** The latter implies, beyond the methods and tools of concertation, rethinking forms of domination and power relationships.

And at Gret ?

While GRET's vocation is not to provoke or lead social movements, it is responsible for the success of projects based on the articulation between the state, civil society and public and private partners. In the context of the Communs program, GRET's responsibility is rather to support, through its projects, **transformative processes** that give citizens a voice in the governance of natural resources, services and territories.

I share the intuition that grassroots education, as a **political approach and a set of tools and methods**, can be useful in supporting such dynamics. It can also be **useful to facilitators**, such as yourselves, in fostering dialogue between the various stakeholders/users of the resource/service...

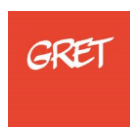
Over the years that I've been working here and there at GRET, I've felt a strong desire to discover grassroots education. Whether it's to make internal meetings or meetings with partners run more smoothly, or to rethink the ways in which we intervene with the citizens who are primarily concerned by GRET's projects. In this way, grassroots education is specifically useful to teams in the field, in their **work to mobilize stakeholders and facilitate shared governance**.

Towards social transformation

In fact, experience shows that the success of social transformation actions depends on the articulation of three ways of acting on a social issue, depending on whether one is acting **in the name of power, against power or outside the power in place** in the human organization one wishes to transform. This echoes the questions raised by GRET's teams on the commons-based approach : **what neutrality, what posture should the facilitator adopt** vis-à-vis power? vis-à-vis stakeholders in general? A post will be devoted to this subject.

These three logics of action each have their advantages and disadvantages. And social transformation is only possible when these three logics of action are well in place in the face of a social problem. Social transformation is like a three-legged stool: when one leg is damaged, the stool can't stand.

Facilitating time and space for expression, analysis, deliberation and decision-making throughout the course of a project, working through conflicts between different categories of stakeholders, and devising processes for cooperation in this work are all challenges that you encounter in adopting a commons-based approach in the countries where you work, and which would benefit from being designed with grassroots education practices in mind. In this way, **the knowledge and know-how gained from grassroots education could help us to think about the way in which GRET's projects are conducted, especially when a commons-based approach is implemented**.



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Going further...

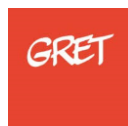
- ✓ On my site, there's a short [history of grassroots education](#).
- ✓ Adeline de Lepinay's site has a tab entitled "[What is grassroots education?](#)"
- ✓ Franck Lepage's gesticulated conference "[Inculture\(s\)](#)".
- ✓ Alexia Morvan's thesis "[Pour une éducation populaire politique](#)" (link to download PDF)

What is it all about ?

This "post" is part of a series of 11 on grassroots education methods and techniques that can be used to implement a commons-based approach.

In terms of form, it's a short text (or « pop-note »), accompanied by a video clip (maximum 5 minutes), posted each month on the Internet for all Gretians interested in the commons-based approach. Basically, the idea is to share and discuss a monthly contribution - thoughts, concepts, tools - from the field of grassroots education.

The aim is to help you in your strategies to support shared governance. Perhaps you've already attended the Tropics training course on grassroots education? These posts are part of Gret's acculturation to this approach.



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