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# “Gumboots and Grassroots”

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

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of:

**Masters of Business Studies**

**in**

**Management**

**at**

Massey University, Albany, New Zealand

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2017

## 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 Leadership processes within the groups confirmed an outdated leader-follower influence paradigm and strong parallels with elements of Complexity Leadership Theory, especially in terms of enabling leadership to create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.

## Acknowledgements

In keeping with the grassroots community-led perspective of this thesis, I would like to acknowledge all those in my *community of interest* who assisted me to complete this thesis.

Firstly, I'd like to recognise inspirational *grassroots champions* Nicole Sorensen, Bev Trowbridge, Louise Giltrap and their grassroots associations who are demonstrating such effective and enabling leadership within their communities. Thank you for sharing your lives and stories with me.

I acknowledge the graduates of the AgriWomen's Development Trust "Escalator" governance and leadership programme who inspired this explorative enquiry by choosing to engage in grassroots leadership outside more formal leadership roles.

A huge amount of gratitude goes to my thesis supervisors at Massey University; Dr Margot Edwards who has expertly and patiently guided me through the maze and wonder of producing a thesis and Dr Kaye Thorn for her insightful advice and critique at pivotal moments along the way.

I also acknowledge the unconditional support from my parents, children, extended family and friends who have shared my successes and challenges throughout, especially Robert and Fay Mills, my inspirational mother Alison Sofield and my beloved husband Robert Neeley. Your support has been outstanding and your belief in my ability unwavering.

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