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Abstract

Grassroots leadership occupies a unique place in non-profit governance, providing a counterpoint to professionalized and donor-driven models that emphasize managerial control and hierarchical efficiency. This article develops the conceptual foundations of grassroots leadership by contrasting its community-embedded orientation with the technical and bureaucratic logics of professionalized leadership. The analysis draws on Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, feminist leadership traditions, and Indigenous perspectives to demonstrate how grassroots leadership derives legitimacy from relational accountability, cultural belonging, and collective participation rather than institutional credentials. Comparative insights reveal differences between the Global South, where grassroots leadership often emerges as a survival strategy in contexts of exclusion and state neglect, and the Global North, where it is more frequently associated with advocacy and migrant organizing. Critical attention is also given to the risks of romanticization, co-optation, and reproduction of local inequalities. By integrating diverse theoretical traditions and recognizing both potentials and limitations, this article argues that grassroots leadership is best understood as a dynamic, dialogical, and culturally embedded practice that both resists and reshapes dominant paradigms of non-profit governance.

Keywords

grassroots leadership; feminist leadership; Indigenous traditions; participatory development; empowerment; governance; social movements

1. Introduction

The study of leadership in non-profit organizations has long been dominated by managerial frameworks emphasizing technical competence, efficiency, and accountability to external donors. While these models deliver important organizational capacities, they risk reinforcing hierarchies and silencing the communities non-profits claim to serve. Grassroots leadership, by contrast, derives legitimacy from lived experience, cultural knowledge, and embeddedness within local contexts. It prioritizes trust, participation, and relational

accountability, positioning leadership as a collective responsibility rather than an individual title.

This article develops the conceptual foundations of grassroots leadership by drawing on critical theoretical traditions and examining its diverse manifestations across regions. It highlights both the transformative potential of grassroots leadership and the risks of romanticization, co-optation, and internal inequality.

2. Grassroots Leadership versus Professionalized Models

Professionalized leadership in the NGO sector typically reflects hierarchical structures modeled on corporate or bureaucratic systems. Authority derives from formal credentials, managerial expertise, and accountability primarily directed toward donors. Grassroots leadership, by contrast, emerges from community participation, cultural belonging, and relational trust. Its authority is conferred by recognition within the community rather than institutional status. This contrast highlights fundamentally different sources of legitimacy and accountability.

3. Theoretical Foundations

3.1 Paulo Freire and Critical Pedagogy

Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed emphasizes critical consciousness, dialogue, and collective agency. Grassroots leadership is not a position of command but a process of enabling communities to recognize their capacity for action through cycles of reflection and praxis.

3.2 Feminist Leadership Traditions

Feminist perspectives highlight care, inclusion, and the redistribution of power. They resist hierarchical, masculine-coded models of leadership and instead emphasize intersectionality, relational authority, and ethics of care. Women's collectives in South Asia and Latin America illustrate how feminist leadership links everyday struggles to broader structural transformation.

3.3 Indigenous Traditions of Leadership

Indigenous perspectives conceptualize leadership as communal responsibility rooted in reciprocity, intergenerational accountability, and cultural survival. Authority arises through service, storytelling, and guardianship rather than formalized roles. These traditions challenge individualistic Western understandings of leadership by prioritizing collective responsibility and harmony with land and community.

4. Critical Perspectives and Limitations

While grassroots leadership is celebrated for its authenticity, scholars warn against romanticizing it as inherently democratic. Donors and NGOs can instrumentalize participation to legitimize external agendas without transferring power. Moreover, grassroots structures themselves may reproduce inequalities of class, gender, or ethnicity, reinforcing local hierarchies. The critical question is not whether grassroots leadership exists, but whether it genuinely redistributes power and amplifies marginalized voices.

5. Comparative Contexts: Global South and Global North

The forms and functions of grassroots leadership vary across regions. In the Global South, it often emerges as a survival strategy in contexts of poverty, exclusion, and weak state support, mobilizing communities for basic rights and services. In the Global North, grassroots leadership is more closely associated with advocacy, migrant organizing, and social movements operating within established civic institutions. Despite these differences, both contexts share a common emphasis on resisting dominant power structures and articulating alternative visions of justice.

6. Discussion

The conceptual foundations of grassroots leadership reveal it to be both a counter-model to professionalized NGO governance and a diverse practice shaped by cultural, political, and historical contexts. Its strengths lie in its embeddedness, relational accountability, and capacity to challenge exclusionary systems. Yet its vulnerabilities include risks of co-optation by donors, persistence of local hierarchies, and uneven capacity to sustain long-term impact. For academics, grassroots leadership provides fertile ground for rethinking theories of governance, empowerment, and participation. For practitioners, it offers practical insights into designing leadership processes that are dialogical, inclusive, and culturally grounded.

7. Conclusion

Grassroots leadership is best understood not as a fixed model but as a dynamic process rooted in culture, community, and dialogue. By integrating insights from Freire's critical pedagogy, feminist traditions, and Indigenous perspectives, it challenges dominant paradigms of leadership in the non-profit sector. At the same time, critical reflection is needed to guard against romanticization, co-optation, and reproduction of inequalities.

Comparative perspectives from the Global North and South demonstrate both contextual differences and shared commitments to justice, participation, and accountability. Grassroots leadership thus represents a vital conceptual lens for advancing democratic governance and strengthening the legitimacy of non-profit practice in diverse global contexts.

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