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The Grassroots Gatherings

Laurence Cox

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In practice, the Grassroots Gatherings – and groups linked to them – have become the main (and the only continuous) networking of the “movement of movements” in Ireland. To date 10 gatherings have been held between 2001 and 2005. In keeping with the goal of autonomy and decentralisation, there has been no central committee; at the end of each gathering a group of activists has offered to host the next one in their own area and has got on with organising it in their own way, around an agenda set by themselves and with sometimes very different structures and themes.

The worldwide “movement of movements”, which has brought together individual movements fighting neo-liberal capitalism and the “New World Order” since the late 1990s, is a strange kind of animal. Some might say it is less of a single species and more of a symbiotic relationship between several species, or even a mini-ecosystem making its way through the cracks of the world the powerful created.

Metaphors aside, the “movement of movements” consists of several very different kinds of things. It includes a multitude of local campaigns, sometimes organised into large-scale movements around specific issues (opposition to the “war on terror”,

fighting resource extraction companies, workplace organising, struggles over women's rights over their own bodies, movements of peasants and small farmers, intellectual property campaigns, opposition to racism... the list goes on and on).

It includes the high-profile summit protests where the ritual meetings of our rulers are disrupted by direct action, delegitimated by mass demonstrations, critiqued in counter-summits and forced to hide in remote rural areas, dictatorships where protests are banned, behind massive walls or shielded by armies and surface-to-air missiles. And it includes the long, slow process of creating continuity between summit protests, networking between different movements and campaigns, building trust or at least cooperation between different political (and anti-political) traditions: learning to have confidence in ourselves across a whole society or a whole world. The Grassroots Gatherings, which have been running in Ireland for the last five years, fit in here: a space to meet each other and learn to work together; a place to dance, learn juggling, fall in love and practice for street fighting; a place to work on the issues that divide us and identify what we have in common; a very temporary autonomous zone where the phrase "another world is under construction" is more than just a neat slogan.

From one point of view, part of the job of activists is to build links between individual discontent into local campaigns, to tie together local campaigns into movements around single issues, and to find the common threads shared across those movements. This is where we fight back against the isolation and particularism that capitalism, racism and patriarchy impose on us, and where we start to create possibilities that go beyond changing little things within a big picture that remains the same. Although activists are always doing this, there are times when people are on the defensive in their own lives and the big structures of oppression and exploitation are on the advance, and in these times our efforts to connect are houses built on sand, constantly undermined by the tide of money and

power. In other times, such as the last ten years, our own limited efforts connect with the much broader movement of other people's everyday struggles to change their lives; activists learn from these as well as helping give them shape, and the process feels as though it may be able to change something larger, beyond our own comfort zones.

The movement of movements in Ireland draws on long-standing struggles: community opposition to multinationals, the women's movement, left and trade union battles, working-class community organising, the counterculture and a huge range of anti-racist, solidarity and self-organised immigrant groups. It also draws on a long history of networking between movements. Its ability to take these processes further depends both on shifting power relations within people's everyday lives and the broader successes of the movement of movements elsewhere.

Thus Zapatista solidarity goes back to the 1990s, and several Irish activists participated in the two Zapatista-sponsored Encuentros which encouraged networking processes around the world. Irish activists took part in the 2000 World Bank / IMF protests in Prague and the 2001 G8 protests in Genoa, and various events were organised in Ireland around these. Since 2001 Irish involvement in opposing the US administration's "long war" has grown and shrunk in tandem with the movement elsewhere.

Specific features of the Irish situation include the "Celtic Tiger" and, more broadly, the widespread social change from a post-colonial, semi-peripheral situation in the 1980s to becoming "part of Europe" in terms of salaries (and racism), consumption patterns (and individualism), declining religious power (and the defeat of some elements of old-style patriarchy). Many of those whose hopes for social change did not distinguish between the liberal and radical agendas had to discover for themselves that to become "like other countries" was not enough to bring about equality or justice. Others had to gain the resources and confidence to come out from under the thumb of what had often been, particularly at

local level, an intensely disempowering, intimately personal and status-ridden power structure. New kinds of struggles developed – opposing incinerators or bin taxes, reclaiming the streets or opposing new roads projects – and new kinds of alliances were forged.

In this context, a number of activists – on the suggestion of Irish anarchists – took the initiative of calling a meeting for those involved in the movement from bottom-up points of view. The goal was to “keep campaigns open and decentralised, [get] a radical message across [and avoid] the co-optation, fragmentation and professionalisation of activism”. The invitation defined “bottom-up” as broadly as possible (“grassroots, libertarian, anarchist, participatory, anti-authoritarian”) so as to include community activists, feminists, ecological activists and radical democrats. Those writing and endorsing the letter were mainly anarchists (WSM, ASF, Alliance of Cork anarchists), environmentalists (Gluaiseacht, Free the Old Head of Kinsale, Sustainable Ireland), solidarity activists (Irish Mexico group), community organisers, alternative media (Indymedia, Cyberjournal, The Path, Blue, Rebelweb, A-Infos) and individuals involved in abortion rights, anti-racist work and trade unions. They were based in Dublin, Belfast, Cork, Derry, Limerick, Kildare, Monaghan, Wexford, Down, England and Rome.

At the time the goal was stated as the development of a separate grassroots strand within the movement which would nevertheless be able to cooperate with other strands (NGOs, authoritarian left groups etc.) when appropriate. In practice, the Grassroots Gatherings – and groups linked to them – have become the main (and the only continuous) networking of the “movement of movements” in Ireland. Other attempts have been made (the broader-based Irish Social Forum, the SWP-dominated Global Resistance and Irish Anti-War Movement, some NGO-led conferences) but none has had a continuous and active presence, unlike other countries where these strands are often the dominant ones within the movement.

seemed possible up to now, and to ask what more the movement of movements in Ireland can become.

Grassroots Gatherings to date

1. Dublin (Teachers' Club and Spacecraft), November 2001.
"Global and local: a grassroots gathering".
2. Cork (Cork Autonomous Zone), March 2002.
"Taking back control of our lives".
3. Belfast (Giros), October 2002. (no title)
4. Limerick (Locus), March 2003.
"Community, environmental and global justice activism".
5. Dublin (Teachers' Club), June 2003. (no title)
6. Galway (UCG), November 2003. (no title)
7. Cork (Mayfield retreat centre), March 2004. (no title)
8. Belfast (QUB and around), October 2004.
"Building safe communities, addressing gender bias and racism".
9. Dublin (St Nicholas of Myra community hall), April 2005.
"The death of partnership / what now for grassroots activism?"
10. Erris (Rosspport Solidarity Camp), August 2005.
"Local community campaigns"

To date 10 gatherings have been held between 2001 and 2005. In keeping with the goal of autonomy and decentralisation, there has been no central committee; at the end of each gathering a group of activists has offered to host the next one in their own area (the Gatherings are currently stalled because no offer was made at the end of the 10th), and has got on with organising it in their own way, around an agenda set by themselves and with sometimes very different structures and themes.

This means that – rather than the same people being involved in organising every Gathering, or being frowned on if they were unable to do so – the organising teams have been constantly shifting, as has participation at the Gatherings. Not only has this not been a practical problem (indicating the power of bottom-up organising strategies and the growing capacities of activists around the country), but the usual guilt-tripping over participation, and the identification of projects with individuals, seems not to have happened (which means that we are starting to get out of the emotional space of old-style Irish organising). It's a small example, but against the backdrop of traditional activism in Ireland a telling one.

The general framework of Gatherings has been as a series of discussions; sometimes organised along the style familiar from international anti-capitalist events (opening plenary and introductions, multiple parallel workshops, closing plenary), sometimes in other ways (discussion sessions where speakers were limited to 5-minute introductions; "Open Space" methodology; practical planning sessions). Around the edges literature has been distributed, mailing lists set up, contacts made, actions organised and new events planned. Much of the "real work", though, has taken place outside of this structure, in the practicalities of setting up, cooking and cleaning together; childcare and events for children; evening socials; sleeping on other people's floors; sharing buses or lifts; and coming to recognise each other – beyond theoretical principles and the details of our campaigns – as intelligent, competent, independent activists not too different

from ourselves. Participation has varied from about 50 people to about 300, depending on location more than anything else. Of these, at least three quarters at any Gathering I have attended have been activists, people already significantly involved in different campaigns or organisations; while there have been a scattering of people who enjoy gatherings for their own sake, people trying to find a way into activism and overseas visitors, the Gatherings have always been mainly about networking between activists, and numbers need to be assessed in these terms.

This has fed directly in to one of the main goals of the Gatherings, which has been to build alliances by meeting each other outside the pressured situations of organising committees, public meetings and street actions. At the start of the Gatherings, Irish anarchists were already working well together despite theoretical and organisational differences, and links were growing with radical environmentalists around campaigns such as the Glen of the Downs and Reclaim the Streets.

Almost from the foundation, strong connections were made with alternative media (particularly Indymedia), international solidarity (particularly with Latin America), the anti-war movement (particularly its direct action wing). In other areas (the women's movement, anti-racist and immigrant groups, trade union activism, working-class community organising), while the links are real, they are also relatively small, and the bulk of these movements remains separate from the kinds of alliance represented by the Gatherings. This situation is familiar from the movement of movements in other parts of the English-speaking world in particular and sets it off from that in other parts of Europe (such as France or Italy, where trade unions and immigrant groups have been central parts of the movement), as well as from the rest of the world (such as Latin America or India, where women's groups and community organising are far more central to the movement).

years are now only recoverable through Google and often overlaid by dating ads.

Similarly, the grassroots-network mailing list has largely lapsed, and these days mostly consists of cross-postings from the GrassrootsDissent list. The general pause in holding Gatherings does almost certainly reflect the broader questions about their purpose, achievements and limitations, and what role they should have in the future. My own feeling is that they should act as a point of contact between all the different bottom-up struggles happening nationally (which perhaps means meeting less frequently than before, given how much is happening), that they should consciously aim to extend the network beyond its current limitations (and approach activists in the women's movement, trade unions, minority groups and community organising not simply as speakers but to ask how we could do this or to organise joint events), and that they should remain primarily an activist-to-activist event, which is ultimately a better way of introducing people to bottom-up activism than organising specifically "educational" events targeted at people who supposedly know nothing.

The greatest strength of the Gatherings is in the diversity of the movements they bring together; this is always a fragile alliance, dependent on better-organised groups refraining from pushing through their own ways of doing things and pushing others out, and on less well-organised groups pushing to have their voices heard, to make alliances and to create their own space within the broader network rather than retreating to somewhere safer. What was initially an uncertain experiment has become "just how things are", and we are at risk of taking this achievement for granted and ignoring it or getting on with other things. But if we do this, we also accept that this is as much as we can hope to do together, and abandon the bigger space – of who shapes the world – to the forces of capitalist globalisation, patriarchy, "the long war" and racism to define. The real question is to think beyond what has

in Ireland which has had anything like a continuous life, and have contributed significantly to the broader movement (in large-scale protests against the WEF, EU, Bush and G8 as well as in specific struggles at Shannon, Rossport and elsewhere). This contribution has come from sharing skills across movements, identifying common issues which enable cooperation, and glimpsing broader possibilities for social change; it has also come from developing trust among ourselves and supporting the development of local activist capacities (not least through the organisation of a Gathering: it is no small undertaking to host two or three hundred people for an event with several dozen workshops and organise food, accommodation and socials).

Perhaps most importantly, they make visible the “other world” that has been so much talked about in recent years: in the everyday struggles that ordinary people like us engage in to change their situation, in critiques of the official wisdom provided by experts, in our own capacity to organise ourselves and have an effect on the world, in our ability to work together with people who we are supposed to be cut off from by different interests, styles of consumption, ways of being in the world and political traditions. That other world is colourful, problematic, creative, emotional, intelligent, conflict-ridden, interactive and vividly alive in our Gatherings.

This article is of course in part a call to local groups to host another Gathering, and an argument for their continued value. There is a fair amount of work involved in this, but the benefits for a local group, particularly one which is not currently involved in a massive campaign, are significant in terms of revitalising activism, bringing in new people, making links and developing capacity. Another call that needs to be made is for a revival of the Gatherings’ internet presence, which has largely lapsed. A handful of people made an effort last year to gather all the different Gathering websites; the site they built suffered from technical problems and has since disappeared, so that our shared experiences over the last five

A second goal, represented by the principles of the Gatherings, has been to develop a specifically bottom-up wing within the movement of movements, defined in ways which can include anarchists, ecologists, feminists, libertarian Marxists, community activists and radical democrats. Probably the details are not too important (to the best of my knowledge the only debate around these has been during the formation of Grassroots Dissent in 2005), but to the extent that they represent a way of working which enables cooperation across our different organisational styles and traditions, they seem mostly to work.

The main criticisms have been around informal realities: domination by older, more articulate activists and masculine operating styles which disempower women. We should not ignore, though, the “voting with your feet” represented by the fact that people from trade union, community, women’s and immigrant / ethnic minority groups (as well as activists in their forties and beyond) rarely come to the Gatherings except as invited speakers or as members of other movements which are present. This may reflect a criticism of organising styles, a sense that the Gatherings are not relevant to their movements, practical issues such as time, travel etc. or a mixture of all three.

The call for the first Grassroots Gathering in 2001 set out a list of principles which have become accepted as a basis for the Gatherings. The basic points are these:

People should control their own lives and work together as equals, as part of how we work as well as what we are working towards. Within the network this means rejecting top-down and state-centred forms of organisation (hierarchical, authoritarian, expert-based, Leninist etc.) The network should be open, decentralised and really democratic.

We call for solutions that involve ordinary people controlling their own lives and having the resources to do so:

- The abolition, not reform, of global bodies like the World Bank and WTO, and a challenge to underlying structures of power and inequality;
- The control of the workplace by those who work there;
- The control of communities by people who live there; We argue for a sustainable environmental, economic and social system, agreed by the people of the planet. We aim to work together in ways which are accessible to everyone, particularly women and working-class people, rather than reproducing feelings of disempowerment and alienation within our own network.

The third, and most important, goal has been to contribute to the development of the movement of movements in Ireland by feeding into the development of local campaigns and movements as well as direct confrontations with the state. Other than direct organisational links (see next section), it's obviously hard to name which developments can be specifically traced to the Gatherings and which have to do with events in the wider society, the impact of the global movement or the work of other activists and organisations.

What can confidently be said is that the Gatherings have been a significant part of the rise of the movement of movements in Ireland, from a situation where the most that happened locally was events in solidarity with protests and movements elsewhere to the point where the big power structures have been confronted massively – around the cancelled WEF meeting in 2003, the EU summit and Bush visit in 2004; radical, direct action-oriented campaigns with a democratic orientation have grown – around the military use of Shannon airport, the Shell/Statoil project at Rosspoint, other big projects at Tara, Ringaskiddy and elsewhere; and a host of local campaigns and projects have developed, so that (at least in my own town of Dublin) it has at times taken a monthly meeting just to update each other on everything that is going on in terms of

than start from a local campaign and then find their way forward to broader and broader networks.

A second question is geographical. Realistically, only a handful of towns (without naming names!) have continuous libertarian scenes which are able to organise Gatherings – at present, no-one seems to feel able to do so (in some cases because of the pressure of other issues, in some cases because of organisational crisis). At times Grassroots activists have discussed deliberately using Gatherings as a way to help local scenes develop, but so far no such Gatherings – which would logically happen in small towns or extended suburban areas – have happened. Does this mean that libertarian organising will remain a matter of well-connected urban scenes and small networks of individuals elsewhere? Or do Gatherings have a responsibility to help capacity-building and skill-sharing? In Dublin, it seems that the recent anti-authoritarian assemblies and the associated GrassrootsDissent mailing list have to some extent filled the networking place that Gatherings used to fulfil. Something like this might happen elsewhere (Cork? Belfast?) in the future, but will hardly be able to happen even in other cities let alone elsewhere. The geographical issue needs to be taken seriously, however it is answered. A third issue, which to date has been largely fudged, has been that of how decisions are made. This includes the opposition between consensus and voting systems; the extent to which Gatherings are planned in advance by a local team around a theme, left completely open (as with “Open Space” technology) or cobbled together out of whatever workshops people happen to offer. To date, the Gatherings’ focus on discussion rather than decision-making has saved us from total disaster in this area, but these issues have brought up very strong emotions on all sides.

Despite these weaknesses, the Grassroots Gatherings can claim significant achievements, many of which have already been indicated. The Gatherings, and other associated “Grassroots” organisations, are the only network within the movement of movements

tempted particularly in relation to community-based movements, in the preparation of the 5th, 9th and 10th Gatherings.

Here generational questions seem particularly important, as the political experience of dominant groups within each movement (eg feminist academics schooled in the campaigns of the 1980s; community activists who have been through the professionalisation of the 1990s; ethnic minority organisers who are still constructing their own organisations and finding their feet within Irish politics) mean that we are often looking to speak to minority wings within these movements, who are (still) willing to break the law, who are (still) willing to step outside their own organisational comfort zones, who are willing to explore what for most Irish activists are relatively new ways of organising, and who are interested in being part of the “movement of movements” in ways that go beyond attending conferences or passing motions of support.

For the moment, however, the internal changes of political culture seem easier to affect than broadening the network to include relatively self-confident movements, which in turn seem easier to affect than the broad inequalities of power and resources in Irish society. However, the current pause in Gatherings, and the reorganising of the broader “movement of movements” that is underway in Ireland, should give us the chance to think about how we can tackle all three constructively.

By comparison with these political issues, the (other) practical issues faced by the Gatherings are relatively minor. Probably the biggest one is whether the Gatherings should continue to be a network of existing campaigns or whether, as the movement develops, they should increasingly take on a role as point of first contact, with a focus on education and information – something which would probably reduce the degree of democratic organisation in favour of top-down presentations. However, new activists have to start somewhere, and as the movement of movements grows internationally, it can be easier for people to see the whole picture and then try to find somewhere they can make a difference rather

bottom-up organising (from StreetSeen to community gardening, from the anarcha-feminist RAG to anti-racist actions).

Some specific offshoots of “Grassroots” can be identified, where activists have used the Gatherings to develop new campaigns and networks that have taken on a life of their own. Briefly, these include the Grassroots Network Against War, that organised mass direct actions at Shannon airport; a variety of local Grassroots groups (in Dublin, Cork, Belfast and Galway at least); and (in Dublin) the development of Grassroots Dissent and the monthly “Anti-Authoritarian Assemblies” mentioned above from the merger of Dublin Grassroots Network, which organised the Mayday 2004 summit protests, and the Dissent! Group, which organised participation in the Gleneagles 2005 G8 protest.

Beyond this, “Grassroots” has come to stand – sometimes positively, sometimes negatively – for a new style of organising in Irish activism: committed to direct action for radical goals, oriented to bottom-up democracy, and connecting activists across all our diversity rather than trying to force everyone to follow a single “line”. Gatherings have been important organising sites for people trying to develop direct action in particular campaigns, building support networks (eg prisoner support, legal action, alternative media), and creating new projects (eg community gardening, squats / social centres).

Although the purpose of the Grassroots Gatherings have been explicitly focussed on discussion, naturally the prospect of imminent action enlivens things wonderfully, and is one area where specific contributions can be named. The June 2003 Dublin Gathering set out to make a bridge between the energy then flying around anti-war activism and the planned WEF regional meeting in Dublin that autumn. That meeting was subsequently cancelled; initially the government cited security reasons but then (perhaps realising that it was not a good idea to tell people that activism could have effects) came up with various other explanations (a report for the meeting was said not to be ready). Given the political capital in-

vested by individuals such as Peter Sutherland and Mary Harney to bring the WEF to Dublin, it seems unlikely that a consultant's missed deadline would cancel such an expensive meeting. Far more likely is that the 2003 Gathering (said at the time to be the largest libertarian gathering ever held in Ireland) and the more or less simultaneous Irish Social Forum showed sufficient opposition to the WEF that holding it in Dublin Castle as planned would have been a very risky strategy.

The energy developed around planning opposition to the WEF was still available the following year for the formation of Dublin Grassroots Network, which organised a "weekend for an alternative Europe" in opposition to the May EU summit and its politics of Fortress Europe, neo-liberal economics and global warfare. This has been covered extensively by Dec McCarthy in a recent RBR.

In the aftermath of the Mayday protests, DGN and the Gatherings were shaken when one activist was accused of raping another. This brought up issues of personal safety and gender dynamics within the movement, questions of how to deal with internal violence from a grassroots point of view, and a range of power issues as various processes were improvised to tackle the case. Partly as a response to this, the 8th Grassroots Gathering in Belfast was dedicated to issues of gender and race, and at this and the 9th Gathering in Dublin feminists organised their own, massively-attended workshops around issues such as safe space policies.

Most recently, the 10th Grassroots Gathering was held at Rossport Solidarity Camp last year as a way of building support for the campaign and linking rural community-based struggles. In many ways this is exactly what bottom-up gatherings should be for: a tool that local activists can use for their own purposes, rather than a travelling circus or an organisation parachuting into a local area.

The rape case threw up in a very vivid form some of the informal problems which activists in the Gatherings had been aware of without being able to tackle. These can be summarised firstly in terms of participation (relatively few participants from traditional

working-class backgrounds or from ethnic minorities, few participants over forty or under twenty, significantly more men than women). Secondly, in terms of internal culture and operating style, there are definite conflicts between the different ways of being that people bring from their own life experience and political practice (more macho cultures of direct action versus softer, less confrontational approaches; more wordy and competitive orientations versus more hands-on and cooperative orientations; a tendency to assume that everyone shares a common history and points of reference versus attempts to be clearer about one's own background and starting point). Thirdly, in terms of political movements, some of Ireland's largest progressive movements (community organising, the women's movement, trade unionism and the self-organisation of ethnic minorities) have relatively little presence at the Gatherings.

Obviously this can be interpreted in different ways, leading to different political conclusions. One is to look at our own internal practice and try to challenge conventional ways of working, to hold "a revolution within the revolution" as the 8th and 9th Gatherings to some extent attempted to do. Another is to see the problem as lying within the broader society and the constraints to political participation faced by women, working-class people and ethnic minorities, leading to underrepresentation and a focus on the most immediately pressing issues; while there is no doubt some truth in this, it says little about what can be done to change things. Alternatively, we can ask questions about the different political focus of these movements (the emphasis placed on working with the state and elites, the role of professional organisers and academics, the fear of disruptive action) and ask in a more focussed way what elements within these movements may be interested in working with bottom-up, direct action-oriented groups trying to build a "movement of movements" – something which has been pursued to some extent in the selection of topics and speakers. This has been at-