



Podcast Transcript – Group 10

Grassroots innovations: How are local initiatives and transition movements reshaping sustainability?

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Hosts: Elza Heikkinen, Sonali Rathnayake Mudiyansele and Emma Richardson

Guest: Caroline Heikkinen, Executive Director at Strandhem

Produced by: Elza Heikkinen, James O’Sullivan, Sonali Rathnayake Mudiyansele, Emma Richardson and Santeri Sainio

Transcript

Emma

Welcome to our podcast today where we are exploring the contemporary forms of sustainable organising and the people driving change. I'm Emma.

Sonali

And I'm Sonali. Today we dive into social and grassroots innovations, how local initiatives and transition movements are reshaping sustainability.

Elza

And I'm Elza. This podcast is inspired by our course theme, grassroots innovation, transitions, and degrowth. We will discuss what social and grassroots innovation means and how it can be applied in practice.

Emma

To bring this topic to life. We're excited to interview Caroline Heikkinen, executive director at Strandhem and social worker in the well-being services of the county of Ostrobothnia, a key player in grassroots sustainability efforts in our podcast.

Sonali

Before we jump into the interview, let's define our main theme for today, grassroots innovation. These are community driven efforts that create alternative solutions to sustainability changes.

Elza

Exactly unlike top-down policies, grassroots innovation emerges from local needs and collective action often challenging mainstream economic and technological systems.

Emma

We see this in transition movements, degrowth initiatives and ecopreneurial activism. Our guest today is deeply involved in one such initiative.

Sonali

Welcome Caroline! Can you start by introducing yourself a bit to our listeners and a bit about your work?

Caroline Heikkinen

Yes, I'm a mother of five and I'm 43 years old. I have in the main part of my life always thought what I'm going to do in this life and why I am having so many different work because I've been working in school as a teacher and we're working with youths in a youth cafe I've been working with asylum seekers. I've been working for an organisation a women's organisation in many different food projects and teaching families healthy lifestyle, and I'm a carpenter by education. After this education, I've also made other educations like coach and now later also I have this Bachelor of Social Services and social worker but anyhow it's why I have stuck to all these projects and work is because I like when people feel happy. I like when everybody's happy and I'm trying to help. I support people in different kind of situations.

Sonali

Thank you for the answer.

Elza

Strandhem is a grassroots innovation, a pet farm with a cafe open to the public in summer. Now Carolyn will give us a tour of the place. Can you tell me where you are right now?

Caroline Heikkinen

Now I'm at the entrance of Strandhem. I'm opening the gate here. It's quite empty right now. It's the last day of February today and it's in Finland. It's winter. But to the left is where the animals live in the summer. I go past where the rabbits live and now, I will enter the door for the henhouse. Now we are trying to bring life to chickens in my kitchen actually and now I need the lamp for the chickens, that will make heat for them. All empty here. A long time since I was down here because in winter time it's closed. In summer times we have around the corner here we have the pigs. They are very big. The pigs, they are still living. They are four years old and hopefully we will receive small pigs, babies for the spring that we could bring here, but that's just a hope. But they will come back. Matti and Teppo. And now I'm looking towards. Where the cows have been and it's very beautiful. Because we are the cows are here for two reasons. So the people, and also for the environment, Yes, we're making semi natural grasslands here on this area. And in May we will start adding down animals. And actually, I can start to hear some birds right now. So, it's like the new season has started. Now I'm looking towards the place where we have the alpacas. And It's very fascinating how these animals have been opening up this area. Because for just some years ago, it was just. Full of anything here it was just like grass and nobody liked to be here, not even animals liked to be here. So it's really a joy to look around here now and see what we have achieved together. And here's the beach. I'm looking down to the beach, here, to the right. This is quite amazing. We just made this last year, so it's very new the beach. Here's a gate. It closes by itself. So here's our chiefs together with people on the beach. So its a kind of special Beach, I think you will not find this kind of beach anywhere. So when people go through the gate, it closes itself so they don't run away. There is a lot of sand on the beach, ice and glass right now. It's actually very interesting. How this will turn out to be a summer place for a lot of people after just some 3-4 months. This summer we are going to have, I think, 8000 people coming here and we are also getting our first non-European volunteer this summer that have joined to our volunteering systems. Now I'm standing in the outside kitchen and we're looking forward to eating pizza here in the summer because we have bought a pizza oven and we will feed the volunteers with pizzas. Then we have to get more fundings this year and that's make us that we have more options and possibilities to employ more people that can take care of animals and this area. That is amazing because it's like sometimes it just feels like we're running and running and trying to raise everything. So hopefully it's going to be a very lovely summer. That we will have a lot of visitors. A lot of animals to save animals like last year like I told before. We hope also that we will get some pig babies, and we are also maybe starting some renovating projects because. House is in a very bad condition. Now we're standing here on the stairs. We're going to continue. We have to fix and have this stair in a good condition. Actually, it's more beautiful than I remembered. That's so fantastic with Strandhem. It's like every time you come down, you get amazed.

Elza

Thank you for the tour of Strandhem. It will be interesting to see how it will turn out in the summer.

Emma

We would like to know. A little bit about how Strandhem as an organisation started what your motivation was for it and in specific the motivation of it being this free inclusive space.

Caroline Heikkinen

Yeah. The thing was that I was maybe the 40 years crisis, or I don't know. I started to feel that I'm stuck in my life. I'm just cleaning and doing the same things day after day. And of course, in that time I was working with asylum seekers and then also was feeling strong for them when I found out that people that are excluded in society, they need this community, they need something meaningful to do they need community and they need something to do and it's very hard to come from this excluded situation to become included. And one summer, I got a vision in February, 7 years ago now since that vision came, it was so clear. It was just. Do something fun together and everybody can join. That was the vision, and everybody connected to that vision. And here we are seven years later and still people want to connect and want to do something fun together.

Elza

Thank you.

Sonali

Strandhem's activities have been structured into a framework called the strandhem model, which is recognised by Greencare Finland as a social innovation. Could you explain what the strandhem model means?

Caroline Heikkinen

It means that this is a meeting place Strandhem. it has a lot of activities. Activities there include animals taking care of animals. It's also like preparing the meeting place you need to fix things you need to drive this Strandhem. It takes a lot of energy; it needs a lot. It had a lot of needs, and it makes a lot of activities that bring meaning to people in the society and often when we have like social work in our systems, it's just like a taking it's people that are excluded, they take a service and they take and this also make people feel. That they are in the way that they're not giving anything to the society they're feeling. Maybe that there is nobody, but in this Strandhem model we take people that don't have activity. That don't have a meaningful thing in their life. It can be volunteers; it can be with clients and on the of course also workers that these together are driving the working place and the working

place gives activities which bring meanings to these people and also they are giving back to the working place they are giving back to the visitors they are giving. They are feeling the visitors needs also because the visitor coming there. "I'm here and I think it's beautiful. I love it" and they sit down on a bench, maybe in their nature and just enjoy life and the visitor gives back to the working place to the meeting place. And also, to the worker, because they are feeling "wow. I do this. I bring back to somebody, do something. They recognise me, they see me, and they get more joy and they get more, more happy and they feel meaning and they working hard and they get like inactivity and they get included". Because they are getting the community and also science nowadays is that when you do something together, when you do something, you like you have activity and also the environment. That you have the animal, you have the forest, you have the ocean there. You have everything. So many parts together and these three parts becomes this green care acting also that we do this together. It's like you feel nice, you feel happy, and the fourth part is also if you include like professional social worker. You also can bring more into this circle that you the people who are excluded, can get a little bit social help and they also get more inclusion there. So, it's like the circle just go rounds and rounds around everybody's happier, the visitors, the workers and this going on and on and on. So that's just the Strandhem model the activities that the place is giving.

Emma

Really interesting and really important as well. You've kind of touched on there that a core belief is about the activities in nature and how that can create meaning and a form of care. Do you have any other kind of examples of how that's looked with engaging with nature at Strandhem or how it's played a role in someone's life?

Caroline Heikkinen

Actually, I needed an exam work some years ago and the work was that I think Strandhem is the perfect place and that was of course. A person in that took part of that, that work and told that I think Strandhem is a perfect place because it is the nature, it's mushroom there, it's forest there. I like the forest. I think it tells quite a much about how it is because it is a perfect place. It's by in Ostrobothnia in the archipelago there with the animal. You know what else do you need? It's a perfect place to be. And that person also told I don't like animals. But I'll I like it because other people like it and also this is science. If you read in the social what they have. That it is true to see other people feel are happy. It also makes happy for yourself, but mostly all people love animal and also another thing I was measuring in this exam work was. Did they try something? Did they do activities? They thought they wouldn't like. And what did they feel about it and everybody who it was five persons. Who was joining this exam work and everybody told that they were doing an activity that they thought they would not like and they liked it. They found out I liked it and this is also a little bit about this system that people have to try new things to try other things

because they might like things that they didn't know they liked. And also another person told me that. When I'm out in the society, I feel like I'm nobody. Nobody sees me. I'm nothing. But here people want to take a photo of me. Well, I'm somebody and it's like, oh, it's like, melt my heart to make people feel that I am somebody I get recognised by people. To be a part of this community makes people feel nice.

Elza

That is really inspiring to hear and also as an active member in Strandhem, myself, I can witness to not only the individual well-being, but also the collective. It's a real joy of seeing a community come together and create such a beautiful commonplace. The initiatives at Strandhem are also shared in other settings. For example, last summer you invited several partners from the social sector to use Strandhem area for client work free of charge. The participants included, among others, employment services. Social, youth and family work have any of the social workers from the public sector given any specific feedback about the activities at Strandhem or as a social worker yourself. Do the activities you provided at Strandhem differ from the other activities in the social sector.

Caroline Heikkinen

Now, first of all, there's no place like Strandhem here in the area, and that's probably the thing why people love it and. We haven't, of course, making any formula that people have filled in. I haven't had time for that, but everywhere where I go. Whatever role I have, if I have a role I'm working before in also in other organisations I'm working and still they only ask about Strandhem people. Even if I'm on a meeting. That organisations people want to know about what are going on there. So, it means that it's so close to everybody's heart, they want to know they love it, and everybody knows that arena of Strandhem is very good for people in social services, because what people need in that area is that. Society, they don't have to offer this in another place. They can come to our office and talk with somebody. Yeah. And of course they can go. Everybody knows that it's important arena here that people need and have good benefits.

Emma

It's so inspiring and interesting. And I, yeah, I'd actually love to come and visit.

Caroline Heikkinen

Yeah. Welcome

Emma

Thank you.

We were wondering also how the vision of Strandhem has changed over time. So, for example, did you have unexpected challenges over the last seven years and what have you had to overcome to realise your vision of Strandhem?

Caroline Heikkinen

I think the vision with Strandhem is the thing that have made it last for seven years because the vision was so clear. It hasn't changed. Of course it's many different of layers in the vision, it's many different acts who comes out of it, but I think. The first year the social actors was starting to act together, it just came like a natural thing that nobody asked for it because everybody knew the vision. Somehow, even if we didn't have any, we had just social media. We have Facebook that. But some people, they understood what I did, they understood the vision that you can join if you want. We do this together and that's I think is the thing that that's also because it's our star that leads us through all this difficult because. It's not easy to drive this. The vision is our star that leads us through all this hard work and leads us through all things that's coming up that we always know what we're doing. We are trying to make an oasis for people living here to making a place where you can relax, where you can, where you just can come. You can come in like as a volunteer. Like a visitor. You can come like a worker or a client and nobody will put guilt on you that you are doing nothing. Everybody can take the role they want. If they just want to consume, they're consuming, but still, they're giving back to the workers, their appreciation because they are visiting us, so they are not just taking but still that is the vision that everybody come we are doing it together and we are having a nice time there. And this is our goal, and we are still working on it.

Sonali

Interesting hearing about the challenges you have had to overcome, we only have one question left of this interview and that is according to you, what are the key competencies required when leading a grassroot innovation such as Strandhem?

Caroline Heikkinen

Yes, I think also the flexibility of course that. I think that's the thing to be flexible, because if I we haven't had this flexibility, we haven't done this because you have to meet a lot of people, social skills of course, motivations probably the workers motivations to know about. Because it's easy when you have a working place, you give money to your workers and they're happy. You have more money to get the happier they will be. Now we have with volunteers to do and and other like actors that are joining everybody have to this give and take have to be a balance and you have to know also your other actor. If your other actor is an organisation that don't have money you cannot tell OK come to strandhem and we will take to we take money from you because they don't have money. We try to find a balance between giving and taking in the organisation and everybody trying together to find a

solution how we can help each other. Because if we are dealing with the actor that try to make inclusion for clients, if we are welcoming them to our area, we are giving free foods to them because they are. They are making some kind of work there. They are maybe painting our boat there together with their clients. Then we are getting, Strandhem is getting a need the field because we are getting that boat in good condition, and they don't have money. So, we can give them food and they get happy. Because they just came there and do something nice and get food and same with the volunteers. Volunteers don't want money. They want to feel important; they want to feel that they're doing something meaningful and you cannot press them too hard. So, it's the flexibility to the balance to find the balance between the volunteers. If you press them too hard, they will not do anything. They will just. They will just turn around. They will never come back because they say this is a crap place, you know, they're just like using me. So, this is what I'll be balancing with together this flexibility towards our workers, volunteers and actors to find the balance that we are both of us who are getting and giving, and that's what's that.

Emma

That was great. Yeah. Thank you so much for all of your answers. That was all of our questions.

Caroline Heikkinen

Because this is also for us, like the social meeting place that we that you're doing the interview. It's also giving us a lot because you are also recognising us and maybe somebody's listening to your and then you are bringing back to Strandhem. So that's also in the circle because it's also taking and giving all the time and so I'm happy that you joined this journey also and you are in the circle because you are giving us recognition and that means a lot for us and that's also how we can move forward. The wheel will spin around around, around. I will be bought a pizza when all this spring that some students have made in the school. And so, we're going to make this Napolitano style pizzas in the garden in the summer. So, I'm seeing forward for this. And this is also a motivation that we will have that in. We will have in Wednesday's evening. Open for volunteers to come and join to help and I will make Neapolitan style pizza slices then. So, this is like the balance with the motivations. You know, if you're going to get a pizza slice, everybody wants to come to help, don't you? So, join.

Sonali

Yeah, I do.

Caroline Heikkinen

You can join with Elsa some Wednesday evening, so I will give you a pizza slice. You're welcome. I can guide you there also if you want to see me.

Emma

Thank you. Thank you.

Elza

That sounds amazing. I'm really looking forward to the pizzas.

Sonali

It was a very interesting interview with you Caroline.

Caroline Heikkinen

Yes, thank you. I'm happy that you wanted to make it.

Elza

I'm so inspired by everything that she has accomplished, and now with Strandhem as well. It's a place where so many dreams can and the project can come true, and it's really inspiring to see it happen in real life. And also, as Caroline mentioned, the vision has been the guiding star and key success factor for Strandhem. And I would also apply this to her personal life, where her commitment to recognising needs and helping people has been the consistent thread and it's reflected in her work with asylum seekers in women, women's organisations and now Strandhem. It's truly inspiring to see how a strong value like inclusion and well-being for all is so vividly present and has shaped her journey.

Emma

That was an insightful conversation. Let's connect this to what we've learned in class.

Sonali

We talked about grassroot innovation in our course with speakers like Maxim Vlasov and David Bennett. What stood out to you?

Elza

One key take away is that grassroots efforts, drive transitions toward sustainable societies from the bottom up and I also think that Strandhem can be seen as an example of regenerative design because the Strandhem model contributes to ecological sustainability when they are restoring the land while also integrating nature-based activities for people, and therefore the activities support both environmental and social well-being.

Emma

Exactly whether through local economies, sharing initiatives or ecopreneurship, grassroots innovation plays a vital role in degrowth and long-term sustainability.

Sonali

We encourage you to explore ways to engage in grassroots innovations in your own context.

Elza

That's all for today's episode of our podcast. We hope you found it inspiring and insightful.

Emma

And a big thank you to Caroline Heikkinen for joining us and sharing their work.

Sonali

If you are enjoying our podcast, share it with your network and continue the conversation. Let's make grassroot innovation a movement not just a concept.

Elza

Until next time, keep learning, keep questioning and keep organising for change. Thank you so much for listening.