

How social movements give renewables a boost

Here's how social movements can help pioneering companies with social goals to overcome the liability of newness, gain legitimacy and go mainstream.



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Social movements can play a key role in driving change when traditional channels for solving problems prove inadequate. From formalizing the eight-hour workday to banning ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in appliances, social movements have been behind important policy changes that have challenged the status quo and shaped our world for the

better.

Social movements are traditionally heralded as groups of citizens or organizations that use confrontational tactics, like protests and public shaming, to promote social change. Think of organizations like Greenpeace, which has targeted oil companies, or PETA, which protests against animal cruelty.

While these tactics can generate momentum and have proven successful in some instances, they are often built on principles of dismantling and disrupting the status quo, as opposed to creating a new reality. This could limit their ability to deliver lasting change. Social change sometimes needs other, softer and complementary approaches that help to build a new order, one that makes room for new socially conscious organizations and markets to thrive.

In studying the relationship between social movements and private enterprise, I find ways in which it can be positively transformational, promoting entrepreneurship and helping to establish emerging industries in the mainstream. My recent research looks at how the rise of renewable energy — specifically solar and wind power — has been aided by the existence of social movements dedicated to creating ecosystems where pioneering companies with social goals can flourish. Although I focus on renewables, it's not that difficult to see how some of these principles can apply to other kinds of industries.

Getting off the ground

Social movements fill the gap and work in harmony with entrepreneurs where there is something important at stake and where a sea-change needs to take place. The need to take urgent action on climate change has gone hand in hand with the mainstreaming of renewable energy to provide sustainable power with lower emissions.

In the wake of the war in Ukraine, the need to invest in green energy alternatives to Russian oil and gas has become relatively uncontroversial. But it wasn't always so, and there is still pushback at certain points in the industry's lifecycle.

Over the years, I have studied how both solar and wind power became established in the United States, and I have tracked the role that social movements played in their development. This has led to several generalizable lessons about how social movements can best be deployed and where they can go after the initial push.

In [one study](#) on the effect of social movements on entrepreneurial activity (cowritten with Theodore A. Khoury of Portland State University and published in *Research Policy*), we looked

at the ecology of the solar energy industry at the state level in the U.S. between 1996 and 2009 — a period with many new market entrants, but before solar power definitively took off after 2010. We explored how the size of social movements influenced the entry of new entrepreneurs. One thing we confirmed was that the larger the social movement at the time, the more it stimulated new entrants.

What kind of social movement organizations are we talking about? One thing they aren't is your typical grassroots organization like Greenpeace. These are organizations united around a cause and dedicated to coming up with workable solutions to address a real problem or need — in our case, a specific clean energy technology.

One example is [NextEnergy](#) in Michigan, whose stated mission is to “accelerate energy security, economic competitiveness and environmental responsibility through the growth of advanced energy technologies, businesses and industries.” Their board of directors includes former entrepreneurs and investors in the renewable energy sector. And rather than effecting change by shaming noncompliers, they focus on holding green tech competitions for small businesses to demonstrate prospective innovations, creating roadmaps for advancing energy-efficient technologies and products, and promoting educational programs for green energy solutions.

In short, these nonprofit organizations exist to promote clean energy in general terms and to give a helping hand to entrepreneurs and green energy providers wishing to operate in the region. Such social movements promote prosocial industries and help new players by transforming the landscape in which they operate.

Here, I detail some of the work they do and the specific moments in an industry's timeline when they are positioned to do the most good.

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