

The Role of Co-operatives in Community Economic Development

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT	1
THE RISE OF COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT IN CANADA	1
CO-OPERATIVES AND RURAL, NORTHERN AND REMOTE CANADA	4
CO-OPERATIVES TODAY	4
CO-OPERATIVES & RURAL, NORTHERN AND REMOTE CANADA.....	5
CO-OPERATIVES AND CED?	5
MOUVEMENT DES CAISSES POPULAIRES ACADIENNES	7
GROWING CIRCLE FOOD CO-OPERATIVE	8
CONCLUSION	8
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	9
REFERENCES.....	10

Introduction

Co-operatives, as a business model, are not a new concept in Canada. Since the late 1860s co-operatives have been utilized by various groups, communities and regions (Shaffer, 1999). The goal of this paper is to assess the role that co-operatives may have in northern and remote communities in Manitoba. The paper will investigate the ways in which co-operatives can act as agents towards sustainable community development.

To assess the role that co-operatives play in community economic development (CED), a review of CED literature is provided as well as an overview of the co-operative movement in Canada and internationally. Two cases studies are provided to illustrate the role that co-operatives are currently playing in CED. Both the Mouvement des Caisses Populaires Acadiennes and the Growing Circle Food Co-operative are active in addressing CED issues.

Co-operatives act as an important role in community development in rural, northern and remote communities in Canada. They provide a means for addressing many social and economic concerns such as youth retention, community identity/spirit and preventing leakage of local money. Through the continued processes of decentralization, rural, northern and remote community residents will continue to look towards co-operatives as an opportunity to have input into their future.

Community Economic Development

Community development is in essence, about the development of a community so that it can sustain itself socially, economically and environmentally (Ketilson, Fulton, Fairbairn, & Bold, 1992; Gertler, 2001). It can be thought of as a process by which community members can obtain power to change social, economic or cultural situations. This process involves local people striving towards priorities or goals established by themselves, for themselves usually based on common geography, common experiences or common values (Cabaj, 2004; Ketilson et al., 1992; Brown, 1997). Common community economic development (CED) strategies include downtown revitalization, business development and social enterprise development. As defined by the Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet), CED is “action by people locally to create economic opportunities and enhance social conditions, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged, on an inclusive and sustainable basis” (Chaland & Downing, 2003, 13).

CED has experienced various thrusts over the past four decades. Unlike traditional academic disciplines, CED does not have an extensive consolidated body of intellectual knowledge (Douglas, 1994). Rather, CED is susceptible to many political and social changes. Consequently the concept has gone through many phases; with each phase having a slightly different focus. The application of CED principles surpasses the history of the academic literature. Communities throughout Canada have been employing CED principles well over the past century in a variety of different forms, such as co-operatives and credit unions (Cabaj, 2004).

The Rise of Community Economic Development in Canada

The origin of CED is highly disputed, as too is the date when the concept was created. However, it is generally accepted that the concept originated in the early 1960s (Savoie,

2000; Douglas, 1994; Budd, 1993). Over the past four decades the concept has been largely modified to incorporate various views and experiences. The application of today's CED principles has, however, been applied in communities throughout Canada for over a century.

Communities have, on various scales and timelines, been engaged in CED principles. Aboriginal communities, the first European communities in Canada and communities today have all employed various strategies for either adapting or coping with their economic and social conditions. Through these actions, it has been recognized that it is pivotal that communities take the lead in managing local affairs. This is not a role that either provincial or federal level agencies can successfully lead (Cagaj, 2004).

In the 1960s, CED was not common language. Instead, ideas of regional disparities, redistribution of population and economics, and improvements of regional resources were commonly used (Savoie, 2000). During this period of decreasing regional disparities, CED was not an intention but rather a by-product of various government programs. These government programs and initiatives, both federal and provincial, during the 1960s promoted regional development, or the promotion of the national economic development with a regional focus (Savoie, 2000).

Academically, regional science was the focus during the 1960s (Savoie, 2000), with the ultimate goal to discover and prove all the laws that applied to economic activities in regions. This literature however, had very little affect on the way in which governments created or implemented programs. One of the greatest drawbacks of regional science was its belief that the government's focus should be put on the large urban areas. Doing so, rural, northern and remote areas would experience the 'trickle down theory' (Isard, 1960). This theory had the perceived notion that rural, northern and remote communities were being ignored by their governments. By increasing the support for urban development, for the hopes that rural, northern and remote economies would experience development based on the spin-offs created in urban areas it disenchanting rural residents. A second drawback of this theory was that it almost completely ignored remote communities, especially those of northern Canada. Areas lacking a major urban center, by definition of this theory, would not receive any government support for development of rural and remote areas since support was to be directed to urban centers.

The support for CED in the 1960s did not originate with governments, but rather social activists, such as those related to the co-operative development movement (Ketilson et al., 1992). Geographically, this support was limited to small patches, rarely bigger than one or two communities. As a result, CED in the 1960s was largely unmentioned. It was believed that communities needed to not just adapt to changes, they needed to adopt "deliberate, comprehensive strategies" for community development and "create their own locally-controlled tools to achieve these strategies" (Cabaj, 2004, 16).

The period of the 1970s through until the end of the 1980s saw the rise of large multinational and transnational corporations, large government deficits and the beginnings of the information economy (Budd, 1993; Savoie, 2000). Early during this time frame CED was still rarely mentioned, however during the economic recession of the 1980s this began to change. There was an "argument that the experiments of the 1980s had transformed and weakened local and regional economies" (Blakely, 1994, 1). In the mid-1970s the notion of community development corporations was started in Cape Breton, NS (Cabaj, 2004). The

idea of creating local controlled, community based development organizations soon started to spread throughout the country. Today it is estimated that there are approximately 12,000 organizations of this in Canada (Chaland & Downing, 2003).

The recession of the early 1980s created new economic activities, which consequently meant that the traditional avenue of economic planning required overhauling (Savoie, 2000). To have effective economic development, French economist Philippe Aydalot argued that “unless economic planning could directly involve local communities and local leadership, there would be little chance of economic success” (Savoie, 2000, 37). In 1981, Stöhr and Taylor began the notion of whether development should be based on a top-down model or a bottom-up model. Stöhr and Taylor (1981) argued that communities could influence economic development by taking advantage of existing opportunities in their communities. This change in thinking can be seen within the federal government when the Department of Western Diversification and the Atlantic Canada Opportunities Agency were created in the mid 1980s. Both departments took a bottom-up approach to local development (Savoie, 2000).

Today, the majority of government departments in municipal, provincial and federal governments recognize CED (Savoie, 2000). It is suggested by Budd (1993) that CED represents a paradigm shift. This paradigm shift can be illustrated in the thought of “the clash of pre and post-World War II industrialized systems with the changing post-industrial society” (Budd, 1993, 33). In a time of increasing trade agreements and “freer” trade, CED represented an alternative approach to globalization (Nasewich, 1991). Although there have been many developments in CED, the body of academic literature that exists is still in its infancy. Largely dominated by case studies, the literature on CED is continually growing.

Bruce (2000) argued that for CED to be effective it need to be comprised of nine principles. These nine principles are:

1. Need to have a multi-faceted and comprehensive strategy
2. Need to strengthen community ownership
3. Need to secure access to credit for local businesses
4. Need to build human resources (leadership development, literacy development, employment supports, etc.)
5. Need to build local capacity
6. Need to integrate social and economic goals
7. Need to empower a broad range of the community
8. Need to have sound financial management
9. The process needs to be guided by strategic planning and analysis.

If a CED process embraces these nine principles, Bruce (2000) argues that the process will be more successful than if it were to omit any of the nine principles. As not all segments of Canadian society have benefited from the expansion of Canada’s economy, the need for CED organizations continues.

The terminology of ‘social economy’ can also be utilized to describe CED. As of the 2004 federal Government of Canada’s budget, the social economy was placed on center stage (Ontario Co-operative Association, 2004). The government announced new funding to strengthen social economy enterprises and CED in the areas of capacity building and research.

Co-operatives and Rural, Northern and Remote Canada

Although there is no consistency to the exact origin of the co-operative movement, many academics argue the origins lie within Europe (Shaffer, 1999; Holyoake, 1908). The first recorded co-operatives date back to 1750 in France, where local cheese makers in the community of Franche-Comté established a producer cheese co-operative. Within the decade, co-operatives had developed in France, United Kingdom, United States and Greece.

In 1844 the Equitable Pioneers of Rochdale Society (EPRS) was formed. With the goal of social improvement, twenty-eight unemployed community members saw the opportunity to pool their limited resources and attempt cooperation for the good of the group. Even though co-operatives appeared in the century previous, Rochdale is seen as the first ‘modern’ co-operative since it was where the co-operative principles were developed.

In Canada, the first co-operative was not seen until 1861 (Shaffer, 1999). Twenty years after Rochdale, a consumer-retail co-operative, the Canadian co-operative movement was the fifth country outside the United Kingdom to have initiated this movement, after the United States and Japan (Holyoake, 1908). Co-operatives in Canada were originally formed around relatively homogenous groups, operating in a common geographical locale with common grievances and visions (Coté, 2000). The community Stellarton, Nova Scotia was the site of the first co-operative in Canada. The Stellarton Co-operative served as a mutual fire insurance company for the community (Shaffer, 1999). Co-operatives continued to expand to other sectors including producer co-operatives in 1876, consumer co-operatives in 1885 and credit unions in 1900 (Shaffer, 1999; Shufang & Apedaile, 1998).

Co-operatives Today

Today, co-operatives are commonly defined as “an autonomous association of persons united voluntarily to meet their common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations through a jointly-owned and democratically controlled enterprise” (Conn, 2003, 3). This definition applies to all co-operatives regardless of type, community or membership size or geography.

The current principles that guide all co-operatives were adopted by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) in 1963, a modification of the principles established by Rochdale (Shaffer, 1999). Rochdale was founded on three principles; equality, equity and mutual self-help (Craig, 1980). At the annual conference of the ICA in 1963, seven

7 Principles of Co-operatives

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomous and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Co-operation among co-operatives
7. Concern for community

(Canadian Co-operative Association, 2003a)

principles to govern all co-operatives were adopted. All co-operatives are expected to uphold each principle. First, co-operatives are to be open all members and voluntary. They are not intended to have discriminatory membership requirements. Secondly there is democratic member control. Members have equal voting rights, one member one vote. The third principle is that there be member economic participation. Members contribute to the capital of their co-operative. Surplus can be allocated back to members in the form of equity or it can be allocated for developing the co-operative, creating a reserve or to support other member approved activities. The fourth principle is that co-operatives are autonomous and independent. Co-operatives are self-help organizations that are controlled by their membership. The promotion of education, training and information is the fifth principle of co-operatives. Local co-operatives are to provide education and training to their members to ensure that each member can contribute effectively to the progress of the co-operative. The sixth principle is co-operation among co-operatives. The co-operative movement is most effective by working together with other co-operatives at different scales; local, regional, national or international. The seventh and final principle is a concern for the community. Co-operatives, by their nature, are focused on the needs of their members. Through attempting to achieve these needs, co-operatives work towards sustainable development of their communities (Canadian Co-operative Association, 2003b; International Co-operative Alliance, 2003; Co-operatives Secretariat, 2003; Shaffer, 1999).

Co-operatives & Rural, Northern and Remote Canada

In Canada today, co-operatives exist in five major areas: agricultural marketing, consumer-retail, workers', financial unions (i.e. credit unions or caisses populaires) and insurance (Canadian Co-operative Association, 2003a). There are over six thousand registered co-operatives in Canada with an estimated membership of 15 million (Canadian Co-operative Association, 2003b). Approximately one third of this co-operative membership resides in rural Canada, with an estimated 4.8 million members (McCagg, 2002). In 2000, the revenue of Canadian co-operatives exceeded 30 billion (McCagg, 2002).

It has been well documented that rural Canada is not experiencing the growth that has been occurring in urban Canada (Bollman, 2003; Alasia & Rothwell, 2003). A decrease in population in non-urban Canada has meant that many rural businesses now have a smaller population base by which to make their business succeed. Consequently, there are many examples of decreases in commercial services to rural, northern and remote Canada. Coté et al. (2000) argues that co-operatives can provide an alternative to this situation. Since co-operatives are designed to service the needs of their members, they are less likely to cease operation in rural communities simply because the population base is decreasing.

Co-operatives and CED?

Investigating the role of co-operatives in CED is not a new phenomenon. Research on this issues has existed for many years, as illustrated by the case study of Fort Resolute, Northwest Territories (Fields & Sigurdson, 1972). Since 1972, research conducted on co-operatives and CED has been put into two categories: research conducted in developing countries and research conducted in developed countries. On the international scale, recent research has focused on the role of co-operatives in developing agricultural communities (Ebrahim, 2000; Thordarson, 1990). In developed countries the research has focused on how co-operatives

operate in the new restructured rural economy (Brown, 1997; Wilkinson & Quarter, 1995; Wilkinson & Quarter, 1996; Fairbairn, 1997; Ketilson et al., 1992)

The literature on sustainable community development has been calling for 'new' forms of organizations to assist in this development process (Brown, 1997). Many academics believe that this 'new' form of organization is co-operatives (Brown, 1997; Ketilson et al., 1992; Carroll, Etienne, Flores, & von Muralt, 1969; Baker, Draper, & Fairbairn, 1991). Co-operatives are community-based, rooted in democracy, flexible, and have participatory involvement, which makes them well suited for community development (Gertler, 2001; Brown, 1997; Fields et al., 1972; Craig, 1993). Co-operatives can provide locally needed services, employment, circulate money locally and contribute to a sense of community or social cohesion (Quarter, 1992). Often-marginalized segments of communities have the opportunity to be represented in co-operatives, where in many other organizations they are left out (Fairbairn, 1995; Bruce 2000). Co-operatives can also be seen as an agent for the process of community development.

Essentially, all co-operatives are a form of community economic development. As Ketilson et al. (1992, 1) state, "the process of developing and sustaining a co-operative involves the processes of developing and promoting community spirit, identity and social organization". Based on Bruce's (2000) nine principles of CED presented earlier, co-operative development can be seen as a CED strategy. Community ownership, empowering broad range of community members, and building local capacity are emphasized with co-operatives. Co-operatives are currently having an active and important role in community economic development in communities throughout Canada.

Co-operatives directly and indirectly provide assistance to their community or communities. As a member of the community, a co-operative employs local people. Often co-operatives provide their employees with the opportunities to upgrade their skill sets by providing workshops and courses, such as management training and accounting. For the youth of the community, many co-operatives offer short and long term employment positions. For many students this represents their first formal employment. Through these employment opportunities, the co-operative assists in developing the assets of their community's youth. Through the management or board structure, co-operatives provide informal training to their members. Indirect training may also occur through newsletters, public notices and through communications.

A second community development advantage of co-operatives is that they assist in circulating money locally. The services and products offered assist in keeping money in the community. Residents do not have to travel outside the community to spend their disposable income.

To illustrate how co-operatives can act as an agent for CED two Canadian case studies are provided. The first case study is of the Mouvement caisses populaires acadiennes (MCPA), a credit union in northern New Brunswick. As a co-operative, MCPA's board of directors has directed them to address three issues; economic and social development of their communities, assist in youth retention and assist in sustaining local communities.

The second case study is of the Growing Circle Food Co-operative in Salt Spring Island, BC. The Growing Circle Food Co-operative, located on a small island off the mainland coast, is a retail food co-op that provides shoppers with organic, whole and natural food products. Each

case study will highlight different actions that are being currently employed by co-operatives today to achieve sustainable community development.

Both of these case studies provide an demonstration on how co-operatives have been utilized as a CED strategy. In each case study specific goals and outcomes were established and the co-operatives were a mechanism to achieve these goals and outcomes. Many lessons can be learned from these case studies can be applied to situations in northern and Aboriginal communities in Manitoba. The articles discuss having a common vision among community residents and a process for action on their respective issues/concerns. There are many examples of how co-operatives can act as a strategy for CED and these two case studies represent just a few of these experiences.

Mouvement des caisses populaires acadiennes

Located in francophone New Brunswick, the Mouvement des caisses populaires acadiennes (MCPA) serves over 200,000 people. Comprised of thirty-four caisses populaires branches, MCPA employs 2,000 people. One of the main goals of MCPA, beyond providing financial services to it's members, is to provide the communities they serve with both economic and social development (Demont 2003).



Figure 1: Bathurst, N.B.

In an area described as “sorely lacking both economic and social development”, the MCPA set their mandate to meet both of these objectives (Demont 2003, 46). To address economic issues, MCPA has concentrated their efforts on equity to their members. In 2002, MCPA returned 4% of their profits back to their membership in the form of equity. In addition to equity, the MCPA committed itself to establishing a business development loan program for current small businesses to expand or to assist local entrepreneurs at developing and implementing their ideas.

With regards to social development, MCPA assists in sustaining many communities throughout the area with local employment. Local employment assists in preventing financial leakage in the community, as wages are spent locally. Additionally, MCPA has been directed by its members to take a proactive approach to sustaining the social environment of region. By doing so MCPA supports, both financially and in-kind, local community events such as university scholarships, music festivals, local theatre, art galleries, local schools and local hospitals (MCPA 2003).

The final means of social development employed by MCPA is to combat low rates of youth retention in the rural communities of the Acadian region. The 2000 employment positions are all highly competitive paying positions (Demont 2003). MCPA has targeted local youth for these positions in an attempt to “slow the exodus of the young and the ambitious from the area” (Demont 2003, 47).

The Acadian region of New Brunswick is an area that most “bigger banks would never touch” (Demont 2003, 47). MCPA serves an important part of these communities in terms of both economic and social development.

Growing Circle Food Co-operative

Located in Salt Spring Island, BC, the Growing Circle Food Co-operative (GCFC) is a retail organic and natural food co-operative. The mission of the GCFC is to “link Salt Spring consumers with Island growers and value-added producers to everyone’s benefit. By providing consumers with locally grown and produced food, and providing local growers and producers with greater and more dependable access to the local market, we can promote the growth of a strongly-rooted, sustainable local agriculture” (GCFC 2003). The GCFC also aims at enhancing the local community and to foster a greater sense of community.



Figure 2: Salt Spring Island, B.C.

The GCFC started in 2000, since the area did not have a retail consumer co-operative. Seeing a need for a retailer of organic and natural foods, the GCFC works with local producers to supply them a market for their produce. As well, the co-operative acts to encourage responsible land stewardship in the area. The co-operative model provides GCFC with the ability to merge economic and social goals to positively impact the community, while setting a positive example for others (GCFC 2003).

The emphasis of the GCFC is on community benefits, rather than profit. One of the economic benefits of the co-operative is the multiplier effect that occurs, as every dollar spent at the cooperative has a multiplier effect in the community. Financial leakage is prevented, in addition to addressing land sustainability issues. The co-operative also seeks to educate their members about the issues relating to the sustainability of organic and natural foods.

Conclusion

By virtue of the principles of co-operatives, there is an integral relationship between a co-operative at its community. Often not acknowledged as playing a role in community economic development, co-operatives are essentially a response to community development opportunities or challenges. As CED becomes increasingly more required in rural, northern and remote communities due to decentralization of government powers, globalization and market forces, co-operatives are being seen as a vehicle to achieve a community’s vision or goals. Today in rural Canada, co-operatives are already playing a strong role in the economies of local communities.

The two case studies, Mouvement des Caisses Populaires Acadiennes and Growing Circle Food Co-operative, presented do not represent anomalies. Rather, these exemplify the

relationship that many co-operatives have with their communities across Canada. As a co-operative they are striving for many community development priorities.

Co-operatives should be examined as residents continue to be concerned for the social and economic welfare of their communities. Communities and their residents need to have an awareness of roles co-operatives can play in CED. To often there is a lack of knowledge, or lack of correct or up-to-date knowledge, in some communities. Co-operatives offer communities opportunities to create employment for local residents, create power in the market place, make goods and services available, prevent the leakage of local money and assist in youth retention. Consequently, co-operatives may provide an essential and required form of CED in many rural, northern and remote Canadian communities. For communities in Manitoba, especially for northern and Aboriginal, co-operatives provide a forum for local community residents to be actively engaged in their future. With the ability to address local issues and concerns co-operatives provide a means for empowering local people to make changes, economically or socially, for their communities.

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For further information on the Joint Co-operative Development Project, please visit www.brandonu.ca/rdi/jcdp.

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