Community-university research partnerships

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CHAPTER 2

Why Staying the Course is Important: Reflecting on the Community-University Relationships Associated with the Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships, 2005-2011

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Canada is a vast land divided in many ways: regions, provinces, nations and communities; North, South, East, West and Central; First Nations, French, British, Ukrainian, Chinese, Filipino. Forty years ago, one of the country’s most prominent Canadian historians described the nation as a country made up of “limited identities.” Ten years later, one of its most important politicians characterized Canada as “a community of communities.” Both observations still apply. Both help to explain the perennial Canadian search for a national identity. Both help to explain why Canada is recognized internationally as a country based on values rather than ideological absolutes; over-all, a good country in which to live, in large part because of its capacity for tolerance, its acceptance of diversity, and its essential pragmatism. Differences have enriched it beyond measure.

Divisions, subtleties and ambiguities similarly characterize the Social Economy (SE), a concept that in a formal sense is just a little older than Canada itself. The Social Economy flourishes within nations and across them. It is central to the experiences of ethnic communities, where it can take many forms derived from their respective inheritances. It is a rich source for the development of social services, for stimulating economic growth, and for perpetuating cultural identities. It can help span differences that separate religious groups, divide ideological and philosophical camps, create tensions across class lines, and disrupt rural/urban relationships. It functions within numerous circumstances and conditions around the world, a quality of potentially great significance at a time when many of the world’s current “troubled spots” emerged out of breakdowns in the social fabric of communities.
The Social Economy is never static. It is not easy to define in absolute terms or as precisely as some literal-minded observers might like. It is constantly mutating because its essence is to respond to the consequences and possibilities of social and economic change. For the most part, it evolves practically and largely “on the ground,” built by people in communities, people responding to variable needs through institutions and practices they understand and that are appropriate to their circumstances and capable of meeting their needs. The Social Economy ultimately is not the consequence of policy directives, though it depends significantly upon appropriate government policies. Contrary to the opinions of some, it is not the creature of any particular ideological system, though in any given country it might be more strongly supported by one political movement than another, but even in that respect, one should not rush to predict.

The Canadian Social Economy Research Partnerships (CSERP), which has operated for nearly six years, has been examining the ways in which one complex entity, Canada, can engage another, the Social Economy. This is not as romantic or impossible an effort in partnership negotiation or in windmill tilting, as some might assume. Nor is it a waltz in the dark. The Social Economy is not an unreliable or unknown partner, its character and identity clouded in mystery. Social Economy organisations and movements exist in all societies and, in effect, have done so for centuries, though the name has been used only over the last 160 years. Arguably, for example, what we think of as Social Economy approaches have been used in Canada since the days of New France. The conceptualisation may be relatively new but what it seeks to identify and emphasize is old, if sadly fragmented – that discord being one of the main reasons for undertaking SE analysis.

As understood internationally today, the core of the Social Economy is clear. Institutionally, it consists of community-based organisations with established systems of accountability provided through the organisational structures they inhabit: for the most part, mutuals, voluntary associations, co-operatives, non-profits, and charities – organisations that are required by law to demonstrate (in many instances, through open, elected, publically accountable democratic process) the integrity, minimal costs, and reliability of what they do. As value-based organisations, they aspire to be transparent, democratic, autonomously managed, and service oriented institutions. They distribute such profits or surpluses as they earn on the basis of involvement, not financial investment. They are charged with serving their communities, not as a “nice” thing to do or as a fleeting marketing strategy, but as a main reason for their being.4 Inevitably, this basis in values creates discussions over aims and methods and often leads to deliberation and dispute, but in the final analysis those discussions are the chief source of its strength. They mean that social issues are not lost before the apparent dictates of what some interpret as economic realities.
Despite the internal consistency that flows from institutional structures and the centrality of considerations of values, some people persist in being seemingly mystified by the idea of the Social Economy. They do so despite the fact that, in other ways, the Social Economy’s diversity and ongoing issues are not entirely unlike what one can readily see when considering capitalist forms of enterprise or government agencies that provide services – though the structures and issues are, of course, different. Like the other two general forms of enterprise, the Social Economy has a core of identity but, also like them, its stretches over many kinds of activities structured in several different ways. The Social Economy should not be required to provide a simplistic and completely inclusive definition any more than capitalist firms and government forms of enterprise should be.

After all, how deep is the commonality of interest and form among “mom and pop” shops, gas chains, and multi-national conglomerates? Between newsstands and airlines? How does one simply explain derivatives, business tax codes, interlocking directorships, trade alliances, and the functioning of commodity markets? And, as for government organisations, what is it that would put the Department of National Defence, crown corporations, marketing fish, a lottery corporation, and health clinics into the same category? What are the common values under which they operate? How do they respond to varying stakeholder interests? How do those responses help shape their activities? Do they?

Given that diversity and complexity are typical of all three forms of enterprise, it is reasonable that many universities around the world have created large and growing faculties devoted to the study of business, its complexities, diversities, and uncertainties. It is appropriate that some post-secondary institutions have created significant schools to explore the various themes and issues posed by public enterprise; perhaps more of them should do so. What is surprising, one might even say unacceptable, is that so few have devoted significant resources to the sustained and thorough understanding and development of the Social Economy. One of CSERP’s purposes has been to consider how this imbalance might be effectively addressed in Canada at least. In the process, those involved have had to consider in many and diverse ways the relationships among universities, the Social Economy sector, and governments.

Not only was CSERP particularly concerned with the Canadian experience, it has also been constructed in a particularly Canadian way. In organizing the research programme for CSERP, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council tried to accommodate regional differences by creating six regional nodes (North, Atlantic, Québec, Southern Ontario, Northern Ontario/Mountain/British Columbia / Alberta). These regional nodes were charged with undertaking the bulk of CSERP’s research. They included both academic and practitioner partners (organisations and individuals). They invariably reflected varying, regionally based levels of familiarity with the
concept of the Social Economy, diverse experiences with its institutional forms, and (above all) different local traditions of community activation, the essential characteristic of the Social Economy. They were and are creatures of their own locations. They do not readily conform to any universal “covering” laws, the conceptual framework so much preferred in western intellectual traditions.

In addition, SSHRC provided for the formation of a national Hub. It was charged with creating as much cohesion as possible under the circumstances (the common predicament facing most Canadian national initiatives). It was made up of the directors of the regional nodes and representatives from a number of national Social Economy organisations (such as: the Canadian Community Economic Development Network, the Canadian Co-operative Association, Imagine Canada, and Women’s CED Council).

This paper, written from an academic perspective, is derived from involvement in the national “Hub,” from those who “did what they could.” It is concerned with some of the successes, issues, and limitations of the university/community relationships that emerged at both the regional and national levels. It ends with some observations on how the initiatives that were started by CSERP might be extended.

Some Successes

CSERP has demonstrated the value of thinking about the Social Economy as a distinct sector. This was by no means a foregone conclusion, and, even now, many may not have grasped the full possibilities. The idea of thinking about the varieties of organisations involved in the Social Economy as a group – mutuals, voluntary associations, co-operatives, non-profits, and charities – has not been commonly undertaken in Canada outside of some circles in Québec. It was not so much that there was a learning curve for everyone involved, as there were several learning curves within the regions and within provinces, and frequently within communities. People starting from different places follow different paths.

The specific research and community activation projects will be reviewed and summarized in some depth within the reports of the regional nodes now being prepared or that will be prepared by early 2012. By the autumn of 2011, too, the Canadian Community Economic Development Network will have prepared a meta-analysis on behalf of the National Hub.

The important point is that the project has demonstrated the value in thinking about the Social Economy as a sector, in examining the commonalities and differences across the various kinds of institutions and community activism that it includes. Specifically, work within CSERP has demonstrated that it is valuable to consider such issues as the following from a SE viewpoint:
• the issues Social Economy initiatives tend to encounter as they begin (the challenges of their formative and stabilizing periods)
• what they require in order to become stable and ongoing
• how they relate to communities in the beginning and subsequently
• how they are financed – as they are started and as they progress
• how their nonfinancial contributions can be measured
• how they can maximize self-funding activities
• how they deal with the general and the unique managerial/governance issues they confront
• the kinds of government policies – at the municipal, provincial and nation levels – that are necessary for their sound development
• how they differ in structure and associations in the various parts of Canada
• how the different kinds of SE organisations differ in structure and capabilities.

Secondly, the project has repeatedly demonstrated the value of collaboration between universities and communities. In total, over 300 researchers from universities/colleges and from Social Economy organisations were involved (a little over 65% of them came from the academy). Almost all of them were engaged through the various activities of the regional nodes. The separation between the two kinds of researchers – those within the academy and those within the Social Economy – was not as complete or as sharp as some might expect. Many academics interested in the Social Economy also walk the directions they point to in their talk, serving on Social Economy boards, mobilizing various community-based initiatives, and advising governments on at least part of the policy framework that affects the sector’s development. Many people, especially younger ones, within the sector were already engaged (or became engaged) in university studies concerned with the Social Economy, mostly at the graduate level. There was more exchange between the two groupings of researchers than was commonly realized and it expanded significantly during the life of the project; the boundaries were already porous and became more so.

Though some projects were carried out exclusively by university or SE researchers, most of them were based on university/community collaboration: for example, in studies concerned with food security, health, housing, rural/remote communities, First Nations, and immigration issues. On the academic side, the work of CSERP was notable for engaging researchers from sixteen universities and over twenty disciplines. Their work – and that undertaken by Social Economy organisations – cumulatively contributed markedly to the development
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of a new and thriving research organisation, the Association for Non-Profit and Social Economy Research, and it helped strengthen the previously organized Canadian Association for Studies in Co-operation. It contributed to the formation of strong new research programmes in the field, most obviously at Mount Saint Vincent, Toronto, and York universities and at Yukon College. It helped strengthen existing programmes at universities in Saskatoon and Victoria. It strengthened the research capacity of several SE organisations, most obviously CCEDNet and the Canadian Centre for Community Renewal in Port Alberni, British Columbia.

These successful experiences also have encouraged Social Economy organisations to pursue research activities involving both academics and their own researchers, the Canadian Co-operative Association’s successful application for a CURA grant being one of the most important examples. It has led SSHRC and several universities to reconsider their policies regarding community-based research. It has assisted in (or stimulated) the development of many websites that reflect the research that has been accumulated. In time, one hopes, it will encourage the development of a multi-institutional website devoted to the totality of the Social Economy and/or its constituent organisational types.

These kinds of deepened and continuing alliances between universities and SE organisations may well be CSERP’s most important legacy. This is quite appropriate, one might suggest, because it is a form of particularly rich social capital.

Third, the work of CSERP involved scores of young researchers, many of them employed on specific projects related to their own special interests. Most of them participated in special youth-organized and structured events, usually held in conjunction with the annual Congress of the Federation of the Humanities and Social Sciences or in workshops/conferences sponsored by the nodes and/or the national Hub. Many of those connections are continuing and they bode well for future research in the field. The students readily saw the value and need for transcending traditional disciplinary boundaries in pursuing Social Economy studies. They generally moved easily between academic and community environments, perhaps more easily for them than for some older academic researchers and Social Economy organisation leaders.

Some Issues

Given Canadian diversity and the degrees of familiarity with the Social Economy across the country, it is inevitable that there are different emphases in how the different regions and nations that make up Canada view its contributions and possibilities. For those who do not take the time to understand the reasons for, and value of these diversities, this situation will be a challenge,
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perhaps used as an excuse inhibiting further enquiry and reflection. Disturbing conventional categories is never easy.

The management of funding within existing accounting systems has been complicated. SSHRC criteria for the kinds of organisations it directly supports made it difficult for SE organisations to participate fully in the Council’s competitions. They sometimes made it difficult to compensate SE researchers who, unlike academic researchers, cannot undertake substantial research activities unless they (or their organisations) receive some special designated compensation. Moreover, when SE researchers and organisations can be compensated, university accounting procedures are sometimes slow in processing accounts, a reflection of the complexity of most university/college financial management systems as well as the underfunding of support services within many academic institutions. Such slowness creates particularly difficult situations for organisations operating within tight budgets, a common enough circumstance among many SE organisations.

On another level, and despite the collaboration that was achieved, it can be claimed that the work undertaken within CSERP was inhibited somewhat by competition among the various stakeholders. In one sense, of course, this could only be expected. A competitive ethos pervades our society. It is no more in evidence than in universities where the emphasis is strongly on individual accomplishments and collaborative, co-operative approaches are not always fully valued. The market place of ideas, a common concept in the academic world, fosters competitive practices in both research and teaching. Co-operative or group research and teaching are not widely practiced and supported; arguably, they are the most effective and important kind of research that can inform the Social Economy.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that organisations within the SE also exist within highly competitive environments. They frequently compete with each other intensely for funding, usually from governments and foundations. The institutional differences – co-operatives, mutuals, societies, and others – have created strong loyalties to approaches and organisations that are slow to break down and, in fact, should not entirely disappear - there is value in perpetuating the distinct approaches of the different institutional forms. The challenges are to learn how to benefit from what each form accomplishes, to find ways to co-ordinate efforts, as it is desirable, and to ensure that people in communities have full and accurate information on all the SE alternatives.

Moreover, people who assume leadership roles within the sector typically possess strong and assertive personalities. They are often highly motivated by deep commitments to what they do and how they do it. They have their own constituencies of supporters, many of them – either individuals or organisations – unaware of the Social Economy dimensions of what they do, especially in English-
speaking Canada. It is not easy to create common understandings and common causes within the total Social Economy, no easier than it is within the academy.

The SE sector and the academy also tend to have different objectives in mind when they carry out research. Somewhat like the private sector, SE institutions particularly want research that addresses immediate practical issues; even more importantly, they want research results that can assist them in making the case for funding from governments and foundations for the projects they wish to undertake. For them, research is very much a moving agenda: the phrases and modes of analysis that are “in” are what really matter. Unfortunately, the “Social Economy” is, to this point, rarely “in.”

On the other hand, academic researchers, who typically juggle a number of research projects at any given time, are more concerned with situating their work within longer-term research agendas. Their most important “audience” usually is their peers: they typically are very much concerned with conference participation and publication in the most recognized journals in their fields – and not necessarily in the public impact of their work. Moreover, within university administrative systems their engagement with SE organisations is typically considered in the “service” category for purposes of career advancement – as defined by decisions over tenure, merit, and promotion. Unfortunately, that category does not normally carry the same significance as “research” or “teaching,” the other main categories for career evaluation at most universities and (increasingly) many colleges.

Not unexpectedly, these different circumstances tend to produce different ways of communicating results. The accustomed styles of the academy and the SE organisations vary considerably. Like most professional groupings, the academic disciplines and sub-disciplines have developed their own vocabularies and modes of thought that work effectively for their own purposes, and as they have evolved, in many instances over long periods. The goal tends to be to contribute to theory as it has been defined, theory that may well contribute to practice – or may not, depending upon how it affects the teaching of professionals active within the SE. The literature that is produced may not be so readily accessible to those who are not of the particular disciplines and sub-disciplines for whom it is particularly prepared. The result can be the production of knowledge without much thought or attention being paid to its readability and implementation.

On the other hand, research produced for and by SE organisations tends to be for immediate and short-term use. It is concerned with practical issues involved in implementing projects or in garnering support from others. It is commonly shared more through workshops, training sessions, panels, and information sessions. It tends to be transitory and rarely is it cumulative within a well-defined theoretical framework.
Another constant issue emanates from the difficulty in raising the idea of the Social Economy within some government circles. English-speaking Canada tends to see the kinds of institutions associated with the Social Economy through the lens of American notions of volunteer organisations. They tend to follow the approach pioneered by The Johns Hopkins Comparative Non-Profit Sector Project. While this approach has produced many important contributions, particularly in demonstrating the immense value of volunteer, charitable organisations, it has, from the perspective of the Social Economy, undervalued the importance and possibilities of co-operative organisations. While there has been some movement in this respect at The John Hopkins School in recent years, this approach remains essentially in place. That difference particularly affects how the SE can undertake economic activities. Overall, the SE in most countries has turned to co-operatives as institutions of agency, notably in undertaking economic development. Not including them (and admittedly there are questions) as central players of many different sizes and types severely reduces the capacity of the SE to address many contemporary issues. Arguably, too, this undervaluation of the co-operative model is particularly important for the future if the capacity of the state to address social issues continues to be reduced. The SE needs a strong and sympathetic co-operative sector.

It can also be argued that The John Hopkins approach undervalues informal, non-registered efforts by groups of people within civil society. Such activities, admittedly very difficult to quantify and evaluate, are nevertheless very important within the Social Economy. They are the seed bed from which formal organisations of the Social Economy emerged. Understanding them and figuring out how they might be encouraged should be an important part of any Social Economy inquiry – and of dynamic Social Economy development.

Finally, in recent years, many people and organisations involved in the SE have watched (and in some instances encouraged) the development of social entrepreneurship. This form of economic development has the advantage of fitting easily within mainstream economic thought in much of North America: i.e., an entrepreneur perceives an economic opportunity and pursues it; the market ultimately adjusts to meet whatever economic needs become evident. What distinguishes it from other forms of mainstream entrepreneurship, however, is that it is directed at meeting some social purpose. Clearly, this is a welcome way of thinking about economic opportunity: any effort aimed at alleviating the problems of poverty and social dislocation should be welcome.

Social entrepreneurship, however, raises issues about permanence of motivation and public accountability. Some individuals seeking to do something about housing for the poor in the 1920s had become slum landlords by the 1940s. In firms where ownership resides in one person or in which securing profits is the dominating goal (or becomes such), everything depends
upon the goodwill of those with power. One can argue that the community-based enterprises following the accepted institutional structures of the Social Economy – institutions such as societies, co-operatives and mutuals – offer better guarantees of long-term commitments, more secure forms of accountability (though vigilance is always needed to ensure that is honoured). At the very least, SE institutions should be encouraged so they can fulfil the “watchdog” role of providing a check on those who proclaim their altruistic purposes while addressing important social issues through economic action. The question of how to respond to social entrepreneurship is important and more open and intensive thought should be focussed on it within SE circles.

The Key Limitation

From an academic perspective, the main limitation within this kind of work is that faculty and students have to find ways in which they can situate it within the teaching and research activities currently prevailing in the academy. A fully satisfactory study of the SE (and any constituent part of it, such as the study of co-operatives) is in reality a complex interdisciplinary field of enquiry. It requires engagement with ideas and topics normally associated with a broad sweep of the Social Sciences, Business Faculties, Schools of Public Administration, Faculties of Law, Faculties of Education (notably Adult Education), and some departments in the Humanities. Creating such a programme in the fiercely competitive and structurally slow-to-change worlds of the academy is not easy. CSERP can claim to have helped start that process over the last six years. It is a subject that will require much more consideration over the years to come if the SE is to play the roles that it should.

Starting and sustaining such enquiries, though, is not easy in the academy. University and college administrative structures, though loosening in some institutions, remain impenetrable in many. People undertaking research in a new and broad field typically have to develop two careers, one in their “home” discipline, the other in the field that really interests them. Journals, especially in disciplines where hierarchies of journals are important for career advancement, such as Business, are often unaware of, or indifferent to, the Social Economy. Consequently, it can be a challenge for people deeply committed to SE research to gain the recognition they need in order to build successful careers.

Starting a new field of enquiry is ultimately a matter of gaining secure funding, designated appointments, and growing recognition, as the history of Women’s Studies and Environmental Studies within the Canadian academy abundantly shows. It is also a matter of cohesion among its supporters (which is never easy), the development of research agendas (a matter for constant attention), and the strategic pursuit of reasonable objectives (requiring a kind of openness and frankness not easily achieved). CSERP struggled with this kind of
open, systematic effort, but perhaps the main forum in which it was most solidly advanced has been through the deliberations of ANSER and CASC, the two academic societies most closely tied to efforts on behalf of the Social Economy. One can only hope that they will continue those efforts and that the research into the SE will not become segmented into limited projects and concerned only with the most pressing immediate issues for funding and institutional well-being. Trees are not an adequate substitute for a forest.

The challenge of building something substantial is no more important than for the young researchers (within and without the academy) who have been attracted to work within the Social Economy. CSERP – the national Hub and the regional nodes – have all benefitted enormously from the enthusiasm and commitment of scores of new and generally younger researchers. Their interests are important, their perspectives valuable, and their contributions appreciated. They deserve to be supported.

Some Observations on the Future

The work pursued through CSERP, despite the challenges and limitations, has clearly demonstrated the value of undertaking research into the Social Economy. It has shown what the cluster of organisations and initiatives that make it up have done and are doing – and more importantly, what they can do. Six years seems like a long time, but it is not long for the maturing of a complicated and extensive research field. Some of the work, indeed, is being pursued through new projects involving partnering organisations and individuals who became known to each other through the work that CSERP undertook. What remains important though, is that there be ongoing, persistent efforts to grasp the wider possibilities; to see what the SE can be asked to do; and to explore, systematically and cumulatively how it can best do it. There will be a growing need for better over-all conceptualisation, for better and more accessible collections of information, and for cogent arguments for the development of the sector. Otherwise, the work will be spasmodic and of passing interest. The full possibilities of seeing what the Social Economy – and its diverse instruments – can accomplish will not be grasped; it will not become a part of public discourse, a readily assumed alternative for the resolution of social and economic problems, and a way to harness the rich and diverse possibilities of community-based enterprise.

The work of CSERP has also suggested the value of extensive, sustained, layered, and multi-party collaboration among all those inside and outside universities who are interested in the institutions and ways of the Social Economy. Some considerable progress was made in building an inter-connected resource base over the past six years, but more collaboration is possible and should be fostered. The rallying and empowering of communities through
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institutions their people control has been an important force in Canadian history (as evidenced by the roles of charities and co-operatives). It can become an even more powerful force, given the communication possibilities we possess and that can be used much more.

We live at a time, perhaps not unlike that when capitalism began to flourish, when there was a dramatic reorientation of the international economies, when the stable, known world that most people had assumed to be the norm, was shaken by economic change, intellectual turmoil, communications revolutions, and social dislocation. The superficial consequences of today’s transition can be seen in the growing power of Asian countries. The more significant shifts are in the transformation of communities, the challenging of general understandings, other communication revolutions, and changing relationships with our resources, just as it can be argued that the decline of the feudal order and its worldview, along with the development of printing and agriculture, were the most important markers in the rise of capitalism. Today, as the roles of the state are altered and challenged, as community fabrics are weakened, the power of group action for economic purpose or social betterment becomes more important.

The Social Economy is not the total answer to the pressures and possibilities that confront our times, but it offers strengths and resources that can be most useful – that it would be foolish not to explore seriously. It deserves a chance to thrive, one that is honest and open, unblinkered and fair. It demands the best from those who would engage it, not for personal or institutional reasons, but for the common good – on which ultimately we all depend. Despite the challenges and the complexity of fitting into the world-view of English-speaking North America, it is important that this be done. It is essential to stay the course. It is important that all those involved consider how the idea of the Social Economy can be further examined and applied.
Endnotes


3. The term “économie sociale” was first used by Charles Dunoyer in 1830. At about the same time its was the subject of a course of study at the University Louvain. More generally, it should be seen as part of a longer standing debate over the nature of the market, a debate that began in the late eighteenth century and has never stopped.

4. The values accepted by ARIES (the European Centre for the Social Economy) are perhaps the best summary of the underlying commitments of people engaged in the Social Economy. They are:

Open – they are made up of volunteer membership open to those able to use the organisation’s services

Democratic – their control systems are based on voting systems in which all are equal and issues are resolved through majority decisions

Autonomously managed – they are independent from the public and the private sector

Service oriented – they are primarily concerned with providing services to their members rather than making profits for their investors

Participation in profits on the basis of involvement – they distribute profits (often called surpluses) to their members or stakeholders in proportion to their contributions or patronage

Concerned about their communities – they make economic and social contributions to the communities in which they reside and they are respectful of their environment