Community-university research partnerships

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Social Economy Research Network of Northern Canada (SERNNoCa)

The North, as outlined by the Social Economy Research Network of Northern Canada (SERNNoCa), is a large geographic area with a very diverse population, many different cultural groups and languages. The area of study includes the Yukon, Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Nunavik and Labrador. Such a vast regional span poses challenges for operating as a research node of the Social Economy Suite. Coordinating any activity across the North requires the support and guidance of many people in order to meet the needs and interests of this broad area. There were many unique considerations for the coordination of the Northern Node of the Social Economy Research Network. Being part of a National research network was one of the key supports for successful operations of this research network. The National office was instrumental in providing key background information, ongoing supports as well as suggestions for communications and facilitation of the program. The Hub, as this was called, provided a central base from which coordinated efforts across the nodes could be facilitated. This office was essential to providing some common ground for the nodes while still allowing each to develop and research topics that were of most relevance to their location. Providing a contextual framework for the social economy was necessary to help the Northern Network formulate our understanding and develop our studies for the North. This helped to provide an understanding of aspects to examine in the northern social economy and how we could highlight similarities and differences that exist across the North and with other parts of Canada.

A full time coordinator was located at the Northern Node base at Yukon College. This was the first step in the process for developing a more dedicated research facility at Yukon College with the capacity to serve as a SSHRC eligible institution. With this assignment came a host of new requirements for Yukon College but it also opened the doors for future research opportunities and developments. It was only possible with the support provided by the PI and other university partners in the program and their recognition of the value of having the research driven from the North rather than the long existing scenario of all northern research coming from southern universities. A vision was necessary to change this model for research in the North. This research program was the first time that a territorial college had the opportunity to establish their eligibility as an institution for SSHRC funding and this in itself, although a lengthy process, paved the way for the future of social science research in the North. Since receiving this
eligibility one of the faculty of Yukon College was awarded a SSHRC Northern Research Development Program grant for a cultural history project in the Yukon.

To establish SSHRC eligibility Yukon College was required to provide documentation including the necessary policy and procedures for management of funds, an institutional research ethics policy and a research ethics board, an institutional policy on integrity, Association of Canadian Community Colleges membership, a research mandate and demonstrated research activity in the social sciences and humanities. The policies and procedures had to be reviewed and approved by SSHRC. As the Yukon College Research Ethics Board was not yet in place the Lakehead University Research Ethics Board agreed to serve as the Board for purposes of reviewing research projects associated with SERNNoCa.

Changes occurred for the financial administration of the research projects to ensure that all funds allocated to researchers complied with the Tri-Council requirements for the use of the funds. The coordinator was responsible for administering much of the financial requirements of this SSHRC grant and assisted the College in its development in this area including the annual report.

Although the term social economy was not widely used in Northern Canada, the ideas and relationships were found to be the foundation of what others in the research network were referring to as social economy and were prevalent throughout the North. Our core members were located throughout Canada with the Network Steering Committee composed of:

- PI and Theme I coordinator - (Lakehead University),
- 3 theme coordinators as co-directors,
- Representative of each of the 3 territorial colleges, and
- Community partners representatives (include Labrador Institute, Labrador; Makivik Corporation, Nunavik, and Arctic Cooperatives Ltd.)

In addition to the network coordinator there was also a part time coordinator established in the Northwest Territories and another part-time position in Nunavut. This provided local points of contact and resource centres for the social economy research. Having territorial coordinators at the Northern Research Institutes facilitated the development of research partnerships, equipped graduate students with a greater understanding of requirements and procedures for doing their research in the North, and enhanced the communication and involvement of community groups in the research process. These coordinators provided faculty-community research connections, facilitated knowledge transfer exchanges, and undertook project development. The territorial colleges have a network of campuses and learning centres and a wide range of community partners providing a presence in many of the communities. This structure enhanced the opportunities to connect with many groups throughout the North including First Nations and Inuit organizations, as well as social economy groups.
The Network Coordinator and other territorial coordinators were ex-officio, non-voting members of the committee but provided local and regional insights into the needs and interests of community organizations. The Committee met at least 4 times per year; every 2-3 months by teleconference and one face-to-face meeting annually to review projects, work plans and achievements, review the budget, conduct evaluations, allocate the shared resources of the project, plan and execute dissemination activities and capacity building and other issues that arose. The Network Coordinator provided regular feedback to the PI to ensure that issues and requirements were met in conjunction with the recommendations from the Committee and the requirements for SSHRC. The Steering Committee recommended protocols for issues such as shared allocation of resources, other sources of funding, relationships with researchers and projects outside the Network and other matters pertaining to the activities of the Node. The Node Coordinator did the day-to-day coordination and financial administration of Network activities.