

# **The Social Economy in Northern Canada: Developing A Portrait**

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**Paper to be presented at the 1<sup>st</sup> International CIRIEC Research Conference on the  
Social Economy, Victoria, BC, October 22, 2007**

## **The Social Economy in Northern Canada: Developing A Portrait**

### **Abstract:**

*The social economy in Northern Canada is shaped by several unique historical, political, and socio-economic conditions. In order to properly frame a portrait of the social economy in this region, these unique forces and their probable relationship to social economy organizations has to be properly understood. This paper outlines three of the most important of these forces: indigenous traditions linked to the mixed economy, the historic role of the state now manifested in the provision of public sector services, and dependence on resource regimes. We outline how these conditions can effect social economy organizations while at the same time stress that any understanding of these relationships must show an appreciation of the complexity of conditions in the north. The paper concludes by using the data from the 2003 National Survey of Non-profit and Voluntary Organizations to outline some of the more evident particularities of social economy organizations in Northern Canada.*

*L'économie sociale dans le Nord du Canada est formée par plusieurs conditions historiques, politiques, et socio-économiques uniques. Afin d'encadrer correctement un portrait de l'économie sociale dans cette région, ces forces uniques et leur rapport probable avec des organismes d'économie sociale doit être correctement compris. Cet article décrit trois du plus important de ces forces : les traditions indigènes lié à l'économie mixte, au rôle historique de l'état maintenant manifesté dans l'importance de services de secteur public, et à la dépendance à l'égard des ressources naturelles. Nous décrivons comment ces conditions peuvent influencer la formation des organismes d'économie sociale. En même temps nous voulons montrer qu'une compréhension de ces rapports doit comprendre une appréciation de la complexité des conditions dans le nord. Le papier conclut en employant les données du Sondage national des organismes sans but lucratif et volontaires pour décrire certaines des particularités les plus évidentes des organismes d'économie sociale dans le Nord du Canada.*

*La economía social en el norte de Canadá es formada por varias condiciones históricas, políticas, y socioeconómicas únicas. Para enmarcar correctamente un retrato de la economía social en esta región, estas fuerzas únicas y su relación probable a las organizaciones de la economía social tiene que ser entendidas correctamente. Este papel contornea tres del más importante de estas fuerzas: las tradiciones indígenas se ligaron a la economía mixte, al papel histórico del estado ahora manifestado en la disposición de los servicios del sector público, y a la dependencia de recursos naturales. Contorneamos cómo estas condiciones pueden efectuar organizaciones de la economía sociale mientras que al mismo tiempo tensión que cualquier comprensión de estas relaciones debe demostrar un aprecio de la complejidad de condiciones en el norte. El papel concluye usando los datos del examen nacional 2003 de organizaciones no lucrativas y voluntarias para contornear algunas de las particularidades más evidentes de las organizaciones de la economía social en el norte de Canadá.*

## Introduction

Communities in Canada's North are currently facing substantial social and economic challenges, and it is plain that these will grow in the short and medium term. The impacts of climate change, intensified international pressure on northern non-renewable resources, and the substantial demands on human energy and ingenuity that will be required to realize the dreams embodied in the modern treaties and self-government agreements—to make them work—all will bring ever greater pressures to bear on the small populations and small governments of the territorial North. Added to this is rapid generational change, fuelled by a booming population of Indigenous young people.

Despite the rapid social change they have known over the last fifty years, many of the small, predominantly Indigenous communities of Canada's northern regions have remained good places to live. In contrast to the situation in northern wage centres, the people living in the smaller communities maintained the language, culture and traditional skills—and the cultural continuity—that permitted them to live a good and meaningful life. They balanced wage employment and social transfer payments with traditional on-the-land productive activity. For some time there have been signs, though, that life in the communities was changing. Some social indicators show a worsening situation. Social pathologies have developed recently indicating accelerating pressures (Bjerregaard and Young, 1998; Bielawski, 2003).

As members of a SSHRC-funded research consortium focused on northern community development, we have considered some of the dimensions of a possible response to this disturbing trend. Our research project, which is just beginning, is based upon a holistic analysis of the contemporary northern political economy. We intend exploring the potential in civil society and in public policy for building upon the strengths of what has been called 'the social economy' to provide northerners with a means for responding successfully to the massive challenges they now face.

Although this term social economy is not widely used in Northern Canada, the ideas and relationships that are the foundation of what others are now referring to as social economy are prevalent throughout the North. Much work has been devoted to a definition of the social economy (Lévesque and Mendell, 2004). Chouinard and Fairbain (2002) have noted that, outside Quebec, the social economy is often referred to as community economic development. The central notion of both these terms is that they include economic activities that are not state-driven and not profit-driven. They include a large "third sector" that is often ignored (Quarter, 1992). In the North, it can be argued that the traditional economy of indigenous societies can be considered part of the social economy in that much of its pre-capitalist values still play an important role in the region and act in contradiction to the profit-seeking values of contemporary "affluent" society (Sahlins, 1972).

The social economy is seen as having the potential for responding successfully to the massive challenges Northern communities now face. Before we can determine the best strategies to use in mobilizing the social economy in Northern Canada we need to properly identify those socio-historic factors particular to Northern Canada that will

affect any attempt to develop the potential of the social economy. This is the first step in developing a 'portrait' of the social economy in this region. Our analysis will show that there are three primary factors that need to be taken into account in any strategy to develop the social economy in Northern Canada: indigenous traditions linked to the mixed economy, the historic role of the state now manifested in the provision of public sector services, and dependence on resource regimes. These are the factors that a current project dealing with the social economy in Northern Canada will be highlighting.

### **Social Economy and the North**

The role and use of social economy organizations is unique in the North given the region's particular conditions. Historically the North has been characterized by two types of communities: resource-dependent communities dominated by settler societies and indigenous communities characterized by a mixed economy (Southcott, 2003).<sup>1</sup> Research on the impact of resource development in Northern communities has shown that a fundamental contradiction exists between the organizational principles of large scale resource exploitation enterprises and "the local social economy" of these communities (House, 1981). The impact of mega-projects on Northern indigenous communities has been an important issue in recent research (Bone, 2003). These projects are typically industrial in nature and affect the communities in varying ways. Research has indicated that the rapid introduction of fordist-style relations and consumption patterns has conflicted with the traditional hunting and gathering economy and traditions. This conflict has led to serious situations of social instability and the myriad of social problems that this instability brings (Chabot, 2004; Niezen, 1993; Stabler, 1990).

Researchers have noted that most Northern Native communities can be characterized as having a mixed economy (Abele, 1997; Stabler and Howe, 1990). In this mixed economy, income-in-kind, from the land through traditional economic activities and cash income from wages and social transfers, are shared between community members. The unique aspect of the Northern mixed economy is the relative importance of subsistence activities. Abele makes the case that this mixed economy can only be maintained through state policy measures to regulate land use and to provide social transfers. In the current post-fordist climate the ability of the state to provide these measures is increasingly questioned and as such the mixed economies of these communities are threatened. Stabler and Howe have pointed to the impending crisis arising in the Northwest Territories due to the fiscal austerity of governments and the reduction of social transfers.

The mixed economy is also threatened by such things as accelerating resource wage opportunities and destruction of habitat and wildlife patterns, making it harder to keep the production from the land section vital. These, and changes in "consciousness" due to television, videos and the school system are challenging the ability of the mixed economy to adapt.

### **The Mixed Economy and the Social Economy in the North**

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<sup>1</sup> Recently a third type of community has gained in importance – the Service Sector community (Bone, 2003).

Our knowledge of the basic characteristics of the mixed economy has been developed over the last twenty years by a number of scholars (Asch 1977, Asch 1979, Quigley and McBride 1987, Usher and Weihs 1989, Nahanni 1992, Usher, Duhaime and Searles 2003, Jarvenpa 2004).

The mixed economy is found in a variety of forms in many places in the provincial and territorial north. It never exists autarkically –that is, in complete isolation from the rest of the economy. Rather, it is a place-specific feature of modern capitalism in modern day Canada. It can be seen as a successful adaptation by rural communities to the pressures and opportunities present in wage-based social welfare economies. Its dynamic is somewhat similar to that described by economists who study the family or the family farm and the “non-waged work” that sustains these important institutions.

In the heuristic model of the northern mixed economy, the basic unit of analysis is not the individual worker (as is the case in much economic theory) but rather the household. The household may consist of two or three generations of related people who tend to pool their income (particularly income-in-kind) and who may or may not share a single dwelling. Households exist as part of a network of kin and exchange relationships that order the sharing of, particularly, harvested food and the labour of harvest. Cash income is important in these households, because on-the-land production depends upon certain commodities that only money can buy: snow machines, outboard motors for boats, gasoline, and the like. In addition, cash is required to buy foodstuffs not available from the land, to pay rent or mortgages, to pay for utilities and for consumer goods. Sources of cash include wages, universal social transfer payments, small business income, and income from art or craft production and sales. Generally, all household members contribute their labour. While all members of the group are expected to be versatile and able to perform most essential tasks, there is customarily division of labour based on both gender and age.

Where the mixed economy flourishes, cash income buys desirable consumer items, but it also, importantly, subsidizes hunting, fishing, gathering and trapping. The gifts of the land are shared, within the household and among households. This sharing distributes to many people the highest quality food available in the north, as well as fur, hides, bark and other useful items that may also be made into products that are sold for cash. Furthermore, while “going in the bush” is physically arduous, intellectually taxing and sometimes risky, it is not typically understood as “work,” but rather as a highly valuable activity that enhances physical, emotional and mental well-being for the people who participate and for their community.

It is important to recognize that the above is a generalized description –it is a conceptual model of an economic form that knows many specific versions. The mixed economy has existed in some form in Northern Canada for at least the last two hundred years, since cash income became available. It has been adapted to many changes in the labour market and the greater economy. In specific locations today it sustains a different balance among various forms of productive activity, again adapted to the existing opportunities.

There is a need for current research investigating the dynamics of particular local mixed economies in Northern communities, as it is likely that the recent changes in the greater Northern economy (such as diamond mining) and perhaps other influences have had an impact. There is no question that harvesting food and other goods from the land remain important sources of income in the smaller communities (see, for example, NWT Bureau of Statistics, *2002 NWT Regional Employment and Harvesting Survey*). The information in this analysis is a valuable source of documentation. Surveys alone, however, cannot describe the *patterns* of production (waged and non-waged), exchange (sharing) and accumulation (storage of food and other goods) that sustain the mixed economy. As we argue below, research on the social economy can assist in the investigation these changes in dynamics.

The essence of the mixed economy is that the individuals and households within do not rely upon a single source for their livelihood, but rather upon several. It may include small business activity, wage employment, gathering, hunting and trapping, domestic care of others, service to the community, and other activities. The characteristics of this economic model are resilience, adaptability, practicality and social stability, and it is able to nurture the spirit as well as the body.

In Northern Canada, the mixed economy can provide a number of concrete benefits:

1. Enhancement of the social safety net.

The mixed economy serves as a buffer that provides some protection to the people who have access to it from the boom-and-bust cycles of the resource frontier. Laid-off workers in urban centres of southern Canada may secure some support from their families, but usually personal savings and ultimately various state-provided social programs are the main sources of support between jobs. This can be a difficult and demoralizing situation in non-renewable resource dependent economies (Leadbeater 1998).

Where the mixed economy survives, people who lose or leave their jobs have another option: they may shift their productive effort to essential non-waged activities, such as hunting, fishing, gathering, food preservation and making products based on the gifts of the land.

2. Mitigation of the tendency to uneven development.

If a viable and meaningful way to earn a living is preserved in the small communities of Northern Canada, people will continue to have the choice of remaining in these communities.

In this regard, a rough analogy might be the role played by the family farm in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Few family farms now survive without supplementary wage income: often some members of a farm family work for wages full or part-time, returning to the farm for planting and harvesting and sometimes returning cash wages

to the farm as well. Given the many pressures on farm producers today, this economic behaviour has tended to keep family farms in operation, and somewhat more people living in the countryside, than would otherwise have been the case.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Cultural continuity.

The mixed economy plays a role in preserving northern cultural continuity. It provides a means for the continued exercise of traditional knowledge and skills and for the expression of traditional cultural values. It supports language retention. Very importantly, it provides an opportunity for intergenerational transmission of the place-specific knowledge upon which successful on-the-land production and living depends.

The adaptive, practical aspects of the mixed economy mean that the entrenchment of Aboriginal values in Northern political institutions and practices will not be an empty exercise. The continued need for knowledge and skills in the practice of the mixed economy means that Aboriginal ideas about human values, the cosmos and humankind's place in it will be less likely to be preserved in "freeze-dried" form – only in tapes and books. Instead, the persistence of the mixed economy can support a less abrupt evolution of social ideas, knitting the knowledge of the past into the new circumstances of each generation, and in this process sustaining a sense of meaning and vitality. The potential benefit here is great, and should be reason enough to draw attention to the sustenance and encouragement of the mixed economy.

The mixed economy is not the social economy. There are important differences that research in the north needs to understand. The notions of non-profit activities or democratic decision-making central to the social economy are not central concepts to the mixed economy. At the same time, many of the activities that dominate the mixed economy can be easily integrated into the social economic paradigm because they both go beyond simple utilitarian economic notions. Sahlins has argued that the traditional economy of indigenous societies can be considered part of the social economy in that much of its pre-capitalist values still play an important role in the region and act in contradiction to the profit-seeking values of contemporary "affluent" society (Sahlins, 1972). Other aspects of the mixed economy that do not fall under a strict capitalistic or state-based economic paradigm are more easily integrated into a social economy paradigm.

### **The State and the Social Economy in the North**

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<sup>2</sup> I would not press this analogy too far: most farmers no longer produce much of the food for their own tables, and to my knowledge there are few mechanisms for sharing non-cash production among farms. Furthermore, the primary economic goal of farming on the prairies today is large scale production of food for mass consumption in Canada and internationally, a feature not present in the mixed economies of the North.

The Canadian north has always been a colony to southern interests. Its historical development is profoundly marked by this fact (Coates, 1985). Despite current trends towards increased self-government, the Territorial North is still heavily dependent on the federal government for the provision of services and decision-making.

Given this history, it is not surprising that all of the people who live in the Territorial North rely upon publicly funded education, health care and social welfare. The term “social provision” is often used to refer to these areas of publicly provided goods: the full set of universal programs that define Canada’s social welfare, education and health systems (Boychuk 2003).

Since the 1950s, universal social programs have been available in Northern Canada. There have been both positive and negative effects (see for example Snowshoe 1977), but there is no question now that all of the residents of the North rely upon the universal programs, as much as do Canadians in all parts of the country.

Specific elements of the system of social provision have a somewhat different direct effect in the two different economic situations that exist in the north. In communities where the mixed economy survives, the system of public social provision is at least partly integrated into it –through transfer payments and income from training opportunities. In the predominantly wage-income regional centres, the system of social provision is the means by which workers gain access to and sustain employment. In all cases, high quality education, health and social services are fundamental to well-being.

All of the elements of the system of social provision have to be considered together. Weaknesses in the employment training system can lead to family distress or ill health, and a consequent need for more support in those areas. Absence of adequate child care or home care for dependent elders can reduce or eliminate (often female) care-givers’ ability to find adequate employment.

We often speak of the system of public provision as having to “respond” to the boom and bust cycle, or cope with its consequences. It does have to do this. But, in addition, public expenditures in this area, appropriately planned, can have a more active role in creating new, higher functioning institutions, spreading risk, capturing benefits, and even multiplying them.

This historic role of the state, first as a colonial power, then as the provider of common welfare state and modern services means that the northern social economy in the north had been affected by different forces than other regions of Canada. The state has been more directly involved in the development of services that are usually developed by social economy organizations. The most illustrative example of this is the role of the federal government in the development of consumer and producer co-operatives in the region (MacPherson, 2000). Paternalistic state policies, no matter how well intentioned, can be seen to have had an impact, sometimes positive but often negative, on the development of social economy organizations in the North. The research undertaken by this Network must take this into account.



## **Resource Dependence and the Social Economy.**

Historically speaking, communities in the Canadian North exist primarily for two reasons: to provide a homeland for the indigenous peoples of the region, or to facilitate the exploitation of a natural resource by non-indigenous outside powers. While whaling and fur harvesting were the initial resources exploited by these outside interests, the creation of permanent communities of non-indigenous peoples was largely a creation of 20<sup>th</sup> century industrial needs. While the Yukon gold rush at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has tended to create the image that Northern communities were created by individual adventurers using their entrepreneurial frontier spirit to exploit the Northern wilderness, the historical reality of development of non-indigenous communities in the North is one of the planning and construction of resource dependent communities designed by outside corporations in partnership with the federal government.

These communities were based primarily on mining. The dominance of one main industry means that there exists a high degree of “dependency” in these communities and, because of the cyclical nature of commodity production, they have a high degree of instability. The specific economic characteristics are: one dominant employer who is usually a large industrial corporation based outside the region, the industry is capital intensive and technologically intensive, jobs are primarily unskilled or semi-skilled “blue-collar” occupations, relatively high wages, few employment opportunities for women, a small retail sector, and a small service sector.

Demographically these communities are characterized by a highly mobile population, a high degree of youth out-migration, a young population with fewer older people, more males than females, larger families, and greater ethnic diversity. The culture of these towns tend to be dominated by a high degree of dependency, a “wage-earner” culture (as opposed to a “stake-holder” culture), a male-dominated blue collar culture, lower levels of formal education, and a negative environment for women.

Sociologists such as Lucas and Himelfarb have shown these towns to be different than agricultural-based and fishing-based communities. (Himelfarb, 1982) According to Lucas, fishing towns, agricultural towns and tourist towns, while they may be resource-dependent, are not single industry communities. Such communities are made up of “small capitalists (and) entrepreneurs” who have a lifestyle which “differentiates them from the population of a community with a single industry base” (Lucas, 1971: 14)

These particular socio-economic conditions lead to a social economy that can be seen to differ from other types of communities. The absence of a stakeholder culture and the lack of economic empowerment can be seen to engender a lack of commitment to the community and a culture of dependence that can be seen to negatively affect the development of social economy organizations. Previous research has shown that other than recreationally-oriented organizations, there are few non-profit or voluntary organizations (Himelfarb, 1982).

## **The Condition of the Social Economy in the North**

The above discussion has shown that indigenous traditions linked to the mixed economy, the historic role of the state now manifested in the provision of public sector services, and dependence on natural resource exploitation can be expected to have an impact on the type, form, operation, and development of social economy organization in the Canadian North. Each of these factors will impact the social economy in different ways. It is not a simple matter of saying that this factor will have a positive impact or that factor will have a negative impact. We expect the reality will be much more complex.

Indeed, we can find initial clues to this complexity in the findings of the most important recent attempt to describe the social economy in Canada - 2003 National Survey of Non-profit and Voluntary Organizations. While this data is not available to allow in-depth investigations into social economy organizations in the north, a 2005 report from this study did list some interesting statistics related to the situation of non-profit and voluntary organizations in the three northern territories (Statistics Canada, 2005). It should be pointed out that this data does not include all social economy organizations. Cooperatives, an important part of many communities in the north, were not included.

The study counted 851 social economy organizations in Territories. It is interesting to note that this was the highest percentage per population in Canada of all the provinces. At 825 organizations per 100,000 population, the percentage was significantly more than the Canadian average of 508 per 100,000 population (Statistics Canada, 2005:19). Only a minority of these organizations are Registered Charities. At 37% this rate is the lowest in the country and significantly less than the national average of 56% of organizations that are Registered Charities (20). Not surprisingly, compared to the provinces, the Territories had the highest percentage of non-profit or voluntary organizations serving Aboriginal communities (20).

The study listed interesting financial characteristics of social economy organizations in the north. Organizations in the Territories had average revenues of \$1.4 million. This was higher than the average of organizations in all other provinces in the country (Statistics Canada, 2005:30). Compared to the provinces, social economy organizations in the Territories had the highest % of income from Earned income – Fees for goods and services. This source comprised 57% of all income for these organizations in the north.

Data showed that social economy organizations in the north varied from other provinces by primary activity. The Territories had the highest percentage of organizations involved in Law, Advocacy, and Politics (Statistics Canada, 2005:19). The region also had higher than average percentages of organizations involved in Arts and culture, Sports and recreation, Education and research, the Environment, and Business and professional associations and unions. The region had lower percentages of organizations involved in Health, Social services, Development and housing, Grant-making, fundraising, and voluntarism promotion, and Religion.

The study also showed that social economy organizations in the Territories were most likely to report problems related to organizational capacity (Statistics Canada, 2005:53). Interestingly the one capacity area where they did not have problems was difficulty obtaining board members. Northern organizations are also far more likely to report problems, such as difficulty providing training to board members (52% in the territories versus 34% in Canada); difficulty providing staff training and development (45% versus 27%); and difficulty obtaining the type of paid staff the organization needs (44% versus 28%).

## Conclusions

Our analysis has shown that there are three primary factors that need to be taken into account in any strategy to develop the social economy in Northern Canada: indigenous traditions linked to the mixed economy, the historic role of the state now manifested in the provision of public sector services, and dependence on resource regimes. These three factors are highlighted in the research currently being undertaken by the Social Economy Research Network for Northern Canada. At the same time, our analysis of the data from the 2003 National Survey of Non-profit and Voluntary Organizations shows that the relationship between these particular forces and the formation of the present social economy in Northern Canada is extremely complex.

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