

CO-OPERATIVE CANADA

EMPOWERING COMMUNITIES AND SUSTAINABLE BUSINESSES

Edited by Brett Fairbairn and Nora Russell



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Introduction

Where We Stand – Place, Enterprise, and Community

BRETT FAIRBAIRN

In the face of challenges and change, ordinary Canadians are renewing and revitalizing community economies through mutual self-help. They are creating sustainable businesses, jobs, and services by working together to meet local needs. This innovative, productive activity of citizens at the community level often gets overlooked. The headlines of the early twenty-first century have been shaped by market booms, busts, and scandals; by big takeovers and mergers; and by the growth or travails of giant corporations. Yet the self-confidence and enterprise of citizens is surprising in its scale and forms. Economic self-help is making a difference to people across the country, even in the face of global financial turmoil and economic restructuring. This book shows how and why.

Across Canada, communities are being affected by forces and trends originating far beyond their own borders – by globalization. While it is in the nature of modern economies to be volatile and interdependent, the speed and sensitivity of change are greater in the last generation. More frequently and directly than ever before, Canadians in Whitehorse and Winnipeg, Vancouver and Victoriaville, Toronto and Truro will see their pension funds, purchasing power, jobs, or incomes change in an instant because of events on the other side of the world. The financial policies of Lehman Brothers bank, demonstrations in the streets of Greece, a tsunami in Japan, and the investment strategies of the Government of China have become immediate

determinants of local wealth and prosperity in Canadian communities. It may seem that only very large companies with access to transnational resources can operate successfully in such a world, and indeed such companies do play large roles in local Canadian economies. But despite such impressions, not all sources of prosperity and stability are beyond the control of ordinary Canadians.

Local resources of entrepreneurial talent, skill at working together, and capital and purchasing power continue to build communities in turbulent economic times. The case studies in the following pages illustrate some of the diversity, successes, and unique challenges of community-based enterprise. Our focus here is on the portion of Canada's economy known as co-operatives – businesses broadly owned by community members for their own use – and described more fully later in this chapter.

This book explains the innovative and enterprising initiatives of Canadians in co-operatives. It does so not in abstract generalizations, dry analyses, or idealized success stories, but through specific examples that focus on the grit and pragmatic realities of communities. The focus is empirical – the realities of life, business, and co-operative invention in typical Canadian towns and cities. The authors do not lose sight, either, of the hope and imagination or the very real constraints and difficulties of everyday economic innovation. The book features new, never-before-presented research that will be of interest to academics, co-op practitioners, community development specialists, students, policy makers, and community leaders, as well as anyone interested in what Canadians are accomplishing by working together.

The stories in this book are as diverse in many respects as Canada's communities, but there are common threads running through the cases we have researched and chosen. First, these are all stories of community self-help in the face of economic, demographic, cultural, and social change, much of which can be understood in today's world through the concept of globalization. They are particularly concerned with the interplay between globalization and social cohesion – in other words, the ways in which changes in society reconfigure, or may be perceived to weaken, the connections that tie communities together.

The second element of the book focuses on organizations, the main units through which people come together to take action greater than what they can accomplish as individuals. The fact that in all cases the organizations we consider are co-operatives is another common thread. All organizations depend on cohesion among people, and co-operatives arguably especially

so. Community-based enterprises such as co-operatives are formed and often sustained by the cohesive relationships, attitudes, values, or needs in their host communities. Existing co-operatives are, then, potentially threatened by social and economic change in general and by globalization in particular. But the story does not end there.

The third piece of our research is the power of imagination and the ways in which ideas create bonds among people, inspire groups to find opportunity in change, and build surprising and unexpected successes that become stable and accepted over time. Of particular interest to our story are examples in which imagination creates new things – symbols, products, services, groups, or ideas – with which people identify, thereby strengthening social cohesion. Co-operatives often sustain and reinforce community identities and can be driven to do so as an important aspect of their economic functions. When communities, groups, or regions experience this kind of renewed sense of identity or cohesion, they are better able to act and influence their own development.

There is an outside/in, periphery/centre character to the imaginative process by which community-based enterprises and forms of social cohesion are created. Ideas that at first seem unfamiliar become rooted in practice until they are accepted and routine; what was marginal becomes central. Co-operatives travel this path, typically starting out small and not well understood, growing until often they become central to their communities in a variety of ways, and eventually becoming so taken for granted that they are almost invisible. In a curious way they are marginal, even when they are highly successful. At the same time, community organizations have their own margins. In becoming wedded to one idea or one form of community identity, co-operatives tend to resist others until or unless circumstances force them to redefine themselves. Often the impact of economic changes is what spurs co-operatives to new action.

Change can destabilize communities, but organizations, combined with imagination, can enable communities to regain some autonomy and space for meaningful local action in a globalizing age. Exposed to market forces but structured in such a way that they are dependent on community cohesion, co-operatives tend to respond to economic change by re-imagining themselves in ways that reinforce community identity and viability – at least when they are successful, which is not always the case. The stories in this book show how co-operatives are affected by and respond to changes in their environment in such a way that the success of the co-operative strengthens the community, even in turbulent economic times.

Globalization and Community

Globalization, as described by Will Coleman in Chapter 1, involves the increasingly sensitive interdependence of local and global events, mediated by economic forces, transnational corporations, culture and ideas, or other vectors. This volume considers the ways in which globalization involves “reconfigurations of social space” that destabilize the foundations of Canadian communities. As Coleman writes, “While such destabilization challenges co-operatives’ existence and their capacity to build social cohesion, at the same time it creates new opportunities. On the one hand, as social space is reconfigured and shaped by new global influences, long-standing community connectivity is undermined; on the other hand, new methods of communication offer new means for finding social partners and building connectivity.”

Globally driven change is evident in some obvious ways in various communities: plant closures, expansions, contractions, or relocations; increases or decreases in investment, reflecting the priorities of big corporations; mammoth businesses like Walmart entering communities, sometimes at the expense of other businesses. A little less obviously, the world of work is changing as people follow different kinds of careers, often less certain and under terms, conditions, and policies set by corporations and chains with distant head offices. Patterns of life are changing as well due to mobility, urbanization, the shifting nature of employment, and the inequalities in job distribution. Urban areas in particular experience migration not just from the rest of Canada but also by immigrants to Canada. Rural areas near cities are transformed by similar trends (including, often, an influx of urbanites), while more remote rural areas may be driven by commodity cycles and experience an exodus of youth. Transportation and communication make people’s experience of place more flexible: we work, shop, conduct leisure and social activities, and access and share information over wider areas. While these changes offer a variety of new possibilities, no doubt they are often experienced as a decrease in security and stability, a loss of control and autonomy, perhaps even a crisis of identity. There is a legitimate worry that in such a changed world, people will feel less connection with each other, less commitment to common societal projects, and less social cohesion.

The view of Canadian communities presented in this book is one of both destabilization and building new forms of connectivity. In the following chapters, we present research and examples from every region of Canada, from urban and rural locales and from Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, to show how ordinary citizens are working together to grapple

with issues of globalization and autonomy. The research on which this book is based comes mainly from a large, cross-Canada research study conducted over the period from 2002 to 2009 by a team of more than fifteen academics, representing seven disciplines, at nine universities.¹ The project was titled “Co-operative Membership and Globalization: Creating Social Cohesion through Market Relations.” It was funded by a strategic grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; by contributions in cash and in kind from the universities, led by the University of Saskatchewan; and by contributions and co-operation from more than twenty community-based partner organizations. It was, and remains, the largest research project on co-operatives ever conducted in Canada, and in many respects it illustrates the potential of team-based interdisciplinary research in the social sciences and humanities. While the researchers used many disciplinary and interdisciplinary tools and concepts to do research in many different kinds of communities and co-operatives, we did so with common questions in mind: How are community enterprises responding to the pressures of globalization? How important is social cohesion to their success as enterprises? Which strategies are working (and which are not), and how is innovation apparent in the changes in older organizations and the emergence of new ones? The book presents our answers to these questions.²

We begin our selective survey in the North (see Chapter 2). The choice reflects two main goals of the book: to examine the characteristics of social cohesion where it is strongly imagined, and to learn from the margins that are often overlooked. Northern Canada – characterized by strong community identities and the stark needs of the people who live in such isolated places – has a lot to teach the south about the character and dynamics of community, and how community relates to business. In a northern setting, it is easier to see how a strong sense of community can drive inventiveness, and how co-operative enterprises reinforce the communities in which they are based. And perhaps the impacts of globalization are most apparent in remote places. In the North, people are moving from igloos to iPods in a single generation. What occupations will young people have? How will they earn a living? How will remote communities participate in a commercialized global economy without losing their distinct sense of the local, tied to land and place?

Questions such as these can also be asked of towns and neighbourhoods closer to the urban metropolises of the south, such as the small communities outside the fringes of Winnipeg, for example. Global economy and

urban culture mean that young people often move away from such communities, or that new residents move in; either way, old forms of local identity are challenged or lost. In rural Saskatchewan, in urban Calgary, and in scattered towns in the Atlantic provinces, community enterprises emerge to respond to local needs; locally based, they compete in today's economy because they work together in networks. These community enterprises are real, viable, and adaptive; they are sometimes struggling, but they have a lot to offer in terms of lessons in practical, community-based innovation.

While there are tried and true models that demonstrate the commercial success of community self-help, there are also new models and new partnerships in Canadian communities. The state remains an important force in a globalizing world. Sometimes, in order to pursue self-help, citizens need to engage the state and participate in the governance of their sector or region. In northern Quebec, forestry workers do this, and also invest in competitive modern jobs, through co-operatives. In urban areas such as Toronto, where poverty, migration, and various social tensions have become evident, the state intervenes in housing policy – a key issue of social cohesion. In cases like these, the state is either “in the way” or is part of a solution (providing co-operative housing, for example). In western Canada, partnerships among the many co-operatives that make up the Co-operative Retailing System (CRS) are the key to the system's success.³ Where resources are thin, as in parts of rural Quebec, brand-new models such as multi-stakeholder co-operatives may bring together a variety of partners to ensure effective services and good jobs.⁴ Partners are also an issue in Aboriginal communities, which, in some ways, represent Canada's future. On the one hand, Canada's Aboriginal communities embody all-too-numerous examples of poverty, unemployment, housing shortages, and ineffective services. On the other hand, youthful Aboriginal populations and new economic models promise strength and opportunity for the future. In Aboriginal communities and in Canada generally, the future depends on critical, emerging partnerships that link enterprise to (Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal) culture and governance.

All the examples above are examined in the pages that follow, through the lens of co-operatives, that is, organizations of people in business to meet their own needs. This lens brings into sharp focus the intersection between community and economy. The hidden story is one of economic and social change, globalization and its myriad but patterned impacts on the places and ways people live, and the varied responses by which communities seek to regain autonomy.

Co-operatives: The Old Is New Again

All in all, communities face considerable pressures in an age of globalization, and community-based enterprises such as co-operatives are on the front lines of change. There are approximately nine thousand co-operatives, including credit unions, in communities of all sizes, and eighteen million members across Canada.⁵ And these numbers have continued to grow since the 2008 recession. Further, studies over the past few years in three provinces have shown that co-operatives have higher survival rates than do traditional businesses.⁶ Yet despite the fact that over half of Canadians are members of one or more co-operatives, the term “co-op” and the abstract concept of a co-operative are only poorly or vaguely understood by much of the public. The current section will describe and define co-operatives more fully. But to add to the confusion, academics, policy researchers, consultants, and developers use additional, overlapping terms, including “social economy,” “social enterprise,” “not-for-profit” or “nonprofit corporation,” or “community economic development.” The Appendix, “The Enterprise with Many Names: Establishing a Common Language,” discusses these various terms for the benefit of students, academics, and others who have encountered them and who wonder how co-operatives are similar or different.

Co-operatives are well organized regionally, nationally, and internationally, and through their networks have adopted a fairly simple and standardized definition of themselves. According to the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA), a co-operative is “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.”⁷ This definition reflects more than a century of discussion. It contains several important elements, including the substantives *association* and *enterprise* and the concept of needs-based activity, as well as the qualifiers *autonomous*, *voluntary*, *joint*, and *democratic*. Where the specified conditions are met, the definition may apply to all organizations, regardless of their legal form of incorporation.

As noted above, co-operatives, broadly speaking, are groups of people in business to meet their own needs. And there are truly astonishing numbers of them. The ICA estimates that there are about 1 billion co-operative members around the world.⁸ Co-operatives generate more than 100 million jobs worldwide and employ nearly a quarter of the world’s population.⁹ And, as already noted, more than half of Canadians are co-op members.¹⁰

Co-operatives were more or less the original wave of community-based business (though as described in the Appendix, other terms and approaches

developed during the twentieth century). Beginning with the first known, official co-operatives in the north of England in 1760, they spread throughout the European world and European colonies of settlement, and then in the twentieth century throughout the world.¹¹ The first in Canada was likely created in Stellarton, Nova Scotia, in 1861, before Canada became a country.¹² We have to say “official” because various communities, including Aboriginal communities in Canada, practised many forms of shared or mutual economic activity, even before the introduction of modern legal systems. No matter what we want to call these things, the point is that communities keep inventing them – and have done so since long before globalization, world markets, and international migration have been making impacts on local places.

Co-operatives are spread throughout Canada today, but they have made an impact on the public imagination mainly through well-known regional movements: the Desjardins movement and agricultural co-operatives in Quebec after 1900; the Prairie farm co-operative movement after 1906; the Antigonish Movement in the Atlantic Provinces during the interwar years; Arctic Co-operatives in the North since the 1960s. With the exception of particular sectors and regions such as the North, housing co-operatives, and worker co-operatives, most of the large, well-known co-operative movements had peaked by the 1940s. For this reason, co-operative movements are often perceived as old, a perception that tends to obscure the fact that such movements are strong, growing, and changing in Canada today.

The down-to-earth, practical concerns of co-operatives and their leaders have contributed to the underestimation of the movement on many fronts. When we invited co-operative leaders into our discussions and planning at the outset of our project, one of their clearest messages was: “Co-operators are driven by vision and values, yet are fundamentally pragmatic.” A former leader told us, “The bottom line for the co-operative is that it must contribute to the enhancement of its members’ social and/or economic welfare, and it must do so in competition with other providers of goods and services.”¹³

Despite, or indeed, because of their pragmatic concerns, co-operatives are intimately bound up with community processes for the formation of identity and social cohesion. Each of them is a microcosm of what is happening to communities, and each offers insights into community response to challenge. The authors of this book argue that, when confronted by the necessity of change or the opportunity for innovation, co-operatives call on reservoirs of social cohesion or social capital in their communities; the

effect of their doing so is to create new social capital and to strengthen the sense of community identity among their members. Because of their typical connections to defined groups of members, mediating between the needs of these members and the market, co-operatives are agents for the redefinition and reconceptualization of community.

Co-ops represent a distinct approach to community economic development. First of all, they address specific needs of specific groups of people. This distinguishes them from general-purpose development organizations such as community development corporations. Second, they aim to meet the needs of their members, not of outside groups. This differentiates them from charitable, philanthropic, and public-service organizations run by one group in order to serve others. In reality, mixed-form organizations have always existed. Large co-operatives tend to serve more or less the whole community, not just a narrow membership group. Volunteer leaders in co-ops are often motivated by a desire to benefit others, not themselves. However, in comparison with other forms of enterprises and not-for-profit organizations, co-operatives are distinguished by a relatively strong *self-help, economic dynamic* and a *clear membership focus and structure*. They are also exceptional in their principles of democratic member control and member economic participation. Co-operatives are controlled by their members, who are the co-operative's users or employees. Representatives elected from the membership compose co-op boards, and members actively participate in setting policies and making decisions about the organization. And members also contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. Profits may be distributed in a variety of ways, including a refund to members based on their patronage of the co-op and contributions to community activities approved by the membership.¹⁴

Co-operatives are unique in the extent to which they typically operate as parts of networks. Communities alone rarely have the resources to deal with issues of market restructuring. When they need to, co-ops can call on outside resources, but this exposes a basic tension: Communities can win greater economic autonomy only by entering into wider networks and connections. Networks are the most important mechanism today for co-operative community development and renewal.

By choosing to focus on co-operatives in this book, we aim to accomplish two purposes. First, we wish to stress the organic continuity of community consciousness and experience. Globalization is not a wholly new thing. Communities have long responded to it, and they don't actually require outside experts to tell them how to do this, although help and consideration

may be welcome. The second purpose in highlighting co-operatives, however, is to highlight change. Precisely because they adhere to a long-established model, co-ops show how organizations do not and cannot remain static. The story of community economic development is not about creating one perfect structure and preserving it. The story is about innovation, imagination, and change – including successive generations of innovation, changing already-existing organizations, and thinking up brand-new ones. All of these processes are going on in Canadian communities right now.

For thousands of communities and millions of people, co-operatives are a framework within which Canadians confront their economic issues. Can a community-owned business survive in competition with transnational corporations? Can it find a niche meeting needs that larger corporations do not? Will it have to reorganize or transform itself to survive, and, if so, can it preserve its core values in the process? What trade-offs have to be made between profitability and accessibility, centralized efficiencies and responsiveness to local needs? Canadians across the country are de facto grappling with these issues whenever they make choices about their enterprises. For some – elected citizens who serve on community-based boards of directors, senior managers, knowledgeable staff – these are important decisions that consume large amounts of time, passion, and attention. For others, particularly consumer-members or employees, these are questions that are addressed less self-consciously as part of the judgments and purchasing and work decisions they make in the course of everyday life. The combination of all these decisions by all these Canadians helps shape the future of community enterprise, and of communities themselves.

Identity, Imagination, and Autonomy

Language and naming are important for alternative organizations because of their need to establish legitimacy – to be understood or accepted. A new government organization or a new corporate business usually does not need to explain its form and structure; these models are ready-made, so to speak, in people's minds. Government and for-profit private businesses are readily understood and entrenched societal institutions. But a co-operative has to explain its form sufficiently so that people are not puzzled or put off; at the same time it has to establish itself as a commercial business, just as any other business would have to. Most community-based enterprises justify and explain themselves simply, on a daily basis, in the course of doing what they do – perhaps through something as simple as signage, design, publicity, or staff behaviours. This is the semiotics of social enterprise – the

messages conveyed by everything from words to images to practices to built environments.

In the longer term, a key problem for alternative organizations of all types is institutional isomorphism: the tendency of human creations, however different or unique they were at the time of their creation, to conform over time to one model or a few models that are conventional and widely known. Thus people may know at the outset that a co-operative is different because of the circumstances surrounding its creation. Over time, however, the initial understanding may fade in memory. The business itself, under competitive pressures in the market, may look and behave much like its competitors. People may forget that it is different (or that it is supposed to be different), and in the end they may perceive it to be (or it may actually be) just like a conventional business. Isomorphism can also happen along the public boundary of the social economy, where social enterprises – community health clinics, for example – may over time become like, or become perceived to be just like, government-run agencies.

Alternative enterprises address the need to maintain a clear identity through a variety of strategies that reproduce their key ideas, values, or practices, particularly from one generation to another. Many of them do this through conferences of practitioners and leaders; education of staff and citizens; codification of central beliefs; the use of symbols and representations; recruitment and networking; and deliberate engagement with youth. Using these and other means, social enterprises remind themselves of their social purpose. Co-operatives have their own statement of identity and principles, one of which is the education of members, staff, and the general public in the practices of co-operation.¹⁵ For co-operatives, the touchstone to which people return to renew their commitment is usually the membership and its needs. Some co-operatives articulate the voice of their members externally in policy discussion and advocacy. Others conduct special programs for youth or even found special branches operated by young people. These are ways of expressing and reinscribing the organization's distinctiveness through both words and actions.

Whichever mechanisms may be used, imagination is a key to creating and renewing co-operatives. When they are created, and periodically or continuously after that time, community-based economic organizations need to imagine how they are different from the conventional models – that is, they need to know where their distinctive identity lies. Because they are dynamic and changing, just like the communities and economies around them, one generation's imagining may not work for those who come after.

For this reason, the use of imagination is not a one-time event, but an ongoing process. Even after a co-operative is well established and operating successfully, imagination is required to conceptualize and execute an innovation. For a credit union to decide it can perform better than a bank, or for a retail co-operative to decide it can survive in the same environment as Walmart – these decisions are acts of the imagination. As the examples make clear, this act of imagination is not (just) abstract or Utopian. This is imagination that engages with the boundaries of practical realities – and pushes against the boundaries of what is considered practical in conventional assumptions.

And there is an important interplay between imagination and experience, between theory and reality. People discover the possibility of a model, and gain confidence in it, by experiencing its successes in small ways. They do not typically leap from an inspiring theoretical vision to a full-blown community example, but instead proceed step-by-step, gaining confidence and skills along the way. Practical, empirical experience is important to communities, and critical to how they imagine new realities. The stories in this book are examples of step-by-step building of alternative institutions by small, cumulative acts of imagination, most of which occur in a definite place and context.

We refer repeatedly in this book to the importance of place. In the organizations and communities we studied, a sense of place remains a primary focal point around which Canadians concentrate their efforts and their identities. This does not have to be the case: There are non-geographic, or geographically extended, communities and identities. We encounter these in cross-Canada organizations such as Mountain Equipment Co-operative, Canada's largest co-operative retailer. We also encounter something similar on a smaller scale in regionalized and multi-branch co-operatives, which represent a newer and more abstract sense of locality or community, where individual towns or neighbourhoods may have had clearly distinct identities and organizations in the past. The community represented by community-based enterprises is fluid – and this is partly a good thing, because inherited communities were not all ideal or viable. While community at every level is imagined, our research shows that place and location remain important to how Canadians imagine themselves.

The place-based, community-focused nature of typical co-operatives seems to lend itself to certain kinds of imagination and reinvention. From their inception, co-operatives have always stood for local, open, democratic autonomy within a centralizing economy; they have also served to reinforce

local places in an environment that tends to destabilize them. Imagination, place, and autonomy make a powerful combination for co-operatives, one that can energize renewal for both the co-operative and its community.

The process of envisioning a distinct role or mandate creates space for a social enterprise. It pushes back the encroaching mental models of purely market- or government-based approaches, and creates a space wherein an organization can be different – at least a little different, although constrained to be sure by its context – but different in chosen ways according to its principles. In a globalizing world where international markets, migrations, cultural transmissions, and state restructuring place pressure on individuals and communities, it is imagination that creates the collective autonomy that enables people to act together on practical issues of common concern and offers them a chance to win back some freedom of action.

When we look at the speed and enormity of global events and their pervasive impacts around the world, it may seem remarkable to think that local people, using local resources, can reshape their own communities and renew their social and economic futures. Indeed, it is remarkable – but when we look at local communities, we see that people are doing it all the time. *How* Canadians do it is a fascinating and under-examined story, one full of insights for communities and organizations. Chapter 1 looks at what autonomy means and why it is important to communities in a globalizing world.

NOTES

- 1 Authors have done their best to update material from the 2002-09 research period in order to provide readers with the most current findings. In some cases this has not been possible, for a variety of reasons – key informants have moved on, new people do not have the institutional memory, organizations have gone out of business, and one of the authors of this book died in 2009.
- 2 Most researchers used a qualitative, interview-based, case-study methodology. We did interviews with key informants and organizational leaders, such as members of the boards of directors and the management team, with staff, with members of the co-operative, and in some cases with members of the community. Some researchers supplemented individual interviews with focus groups, and others used surveys; the different approaches were all conducted under independently reviewed and approved ethical procedures. The idea was to conduct semi-structured interviews that would tease out perceptions and experiences the participants considered to be important, and focus on the relationships between the co-operative and its members or community. We were also interested in the perceived reasons for the co-operative's success, and the difficulties it had faced. In each case, the research was conducted under an overarching partnership agreement with the organization in question, which ensured the co-operation of the organization and enabled it to provide input