

The background features several sets of concentric circles in a light teal color. A solid teal rectangle is positioned in the upper left quadrant, partially overlapping the circles. The text is overlaid on this rectangle and the white background.

# Social Economy Stories

February 2010

**Making the Tent Bigger  
with Sue Rickards**

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Created by the Canadian CED Network

# The Social Economy Stories Project

The Social Economy is made up of civil society organizations that deliberately address social objectives through economic action, often aimed at creating greater social and economic equality and opportunity for people and communities most disadvantaged in our current economy. Co-operatives, credit unions and non-profit community organizations, are all part of the Social Economy. The blending of social and economic objectives is taking root across the world as the best means to replace dependency and exclusion with self-determination and self-sufficiency. Canadian CED Network is a member of the global movement (RIPESS) that has formed to promote the Social and Solidarity Economy as the vehicle to transform global poverty and inequality. In Canada, Canadian CED Network and its partner organization in Quebec (le Chantier de l'économie sociale) have advocated for investment in a major national research program to generate evidence and understanding of the impact and potential of the Social Economy. This led to the creation of the Canadian Social Economy Hub with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The program is co-led by Canadian CED Network and the University of Victoria's BC Institute for Co-operative Studies, with several hundred research partners and projects throughout Canada.

The Social Economy story published here is one of ten stories that comprise the second phase of a two phase project. Complimentary to the first phase, these stories are designed to provide practitioners' perspectives on what the social economy means to them and their communities. The second phase elaborates on the diverse national nature of the movement and how the social economy creates broad-based grassroots solidarity. In particular, the stories you find here seek to highlight the voices of Aboriginal, immigrant and women practitioners.

Phase one Social Economy stories can be found on the Canadian CED Network website, [www.ccednet-rcdec/en/stories](http://www.ccednet-rcdec/en/stories). These "stories" capture the human face of the sector and demonstrate the Social Economy as a real movement that is addressing the social, economic and environmental challenges of today in integrative and innovative ways.

## Acknowledgements

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# Making the Tent Bigger

With Sue Rickards



“What I discovered was that welfare in its current configuration is a very devastating experience for people, in that it deprives them of responsibility and opportunity to learn anything new or to acquire self-confidence,” she says.

*Sue Rickards is an educator and community practitioner. She occasionally teaches a course called “Community Practitioners as Agents of Change” in the University of New Brunswick’s (NB) Adult Education program. She was a member of the Community Non-Profit Task Force which presented a report to the Premier called “New Brunswick Blueprint for Action: Building a Foundation for Self-sufficiency” Currently she is a member of the NB Poverty Reduction Strategy Roundtable and a social enterprise advocate.*

Sue Rickards had her first inkling of the value of social economy principles when she was sent to the community of Elm Hill by the government of New Brunswick to help improve the housing situation there.

This small community near the Saint John River, about halfway between Saint John and Fredericton was initially settled by black Loyalists uprooted from their homes during the Revolutionary War. In return for their loyalty to the British Crown they were given their freedom and plots of land in, what would later become, New Brunswick.

At first, the community enjoyed a period of relative prosperity, as its remoteness allowed the residents to develop their economy free from outside interference. However, as local economies were absorbed into regional, national and global systems, Elm Hill’s remoteness began to work against it. Over a long period of time Elm Hill’s local economy was dismantled and many of its people fell into poverty and welfare dependency. When Sue arrived this process was well advanced. “What I discovered there was that welfare in its current configuration is a very devastating experience for people, in that it deprives them of responsibility and opportunity to learn anything new or to acquire self-confidence,” she says.

While working with the community to decide who needed housing the most and where to build the homes they needed, she says she realized that the current welfare system that simply gives money to people in poverty wasn’t helping anyone.

“What I was really learning was that people without work are doomed to feel hopeless or useless or valueless, and that this was not fair,” she says. “I mean sometimes you get a person who is really not able to work in a standard job, but giving them the opportunity to do something productive and to make a contribution to society brings them out of socioeconomic isolation.”

For Sue, the social economy is a way of providing opportunities for people to contribute to their communities. “The social economy is a means of bringing people into a workplace, into a work experience and letting them learn while they earn and helping them to learn how to work and learn how to plan and all those skills you acquire in a workplace; then they can go out into the mainstream economy,” she says.

Because the social economy is a combination of economic and social components, organizations that work within it can generate revenues and create jobs like any other business, she says. The difference is that social enterprises use their profits to provide support and build capacity so that the disadvantaged members of the community can take the initiative and lift themselves out of poverty.

Sue says she would like to see a network of locally based social economy organizations that can provide people with meaningful work and support to help them develop skills that will allow them to participate as full-fledged citizens. As opposed to

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the current welfare charity system, the network would help impoverished citizens become active partners in the fight against poverty, rather than passive victims. However, to achieve this goal we must first address some of the assumptions we make about poverty in our culture.

There is a current of individualism and competition that runs through mainstream English Canadian culture, which Sue says, can often create barriers that make it harder for people to accept social economy ideas and initiatives. “I think there’s a huge dichotomy right at the philosophical roots where you have a tradition of cooperation in aboriginal and francophone societies, whereas in the English, Anglo-European heritage, it’s all about competition,” she says. “It all goes back to history really and the need to survive and the values of the culture. In aboriginal cultures, for example, the approach is to make the tent bigger and bring everybody in, whereas the European or the North American model for businesses is ‘you’re on your own, buddy, every man for himself.’”

This competitive, individualistic way of thinking makes it harder for people to grasp the concept of combining both social and economic goals within one business or organization. It even spills into the public and non-profit sectors as political parties vie with each other to form governments which set up departments that must compete amongst themselves for resources to protect their areas of responsibility. Non-profits, in turn, must organize themselves to conform to these divisions of responsibility, and compete amongst themselves for the resources the departments choose to make available.

“In a small province like New Brunswick, for example, which has basically two functional political parties, when one party is in, the other is totally out, and good initiatives of the outgoing government tend to be scrapped by the

incoming one regardless of their merit. So it feels like we’re spinning our wheels at every election. We don’t have as many people in this province as there are in the city of Montreal; we can scarcely afford to marginalize so many good people and good ideas whenever the government changes. I’d like to see a circular Legislature rather than an oppositional one.”

She says that non-profit organizations and communities are beginning to see how the problems they face are interconnected, and are beginning to search for holistic solutions.

“Little by little, nonprofits are starting to realize that it’s OK to have an economically-focused organization under the same roof as a social services -focused one; maybe eventually they will both see, for example, that subsidized housing is a key component of economic and social development and they will find ways to work together,” she says.

She also sees hopeful signs in the provincial government’s increased interest in alternative approaches to welfare and unemployment, as well as in successful examples of holistic and consensual models of government, such as those used in the North West Territories and Nunavut. She believes that Canadian society, by virtue of its diverse components, its collaborative traditions, and its historical reputation as a global peacekeeper, can find the inspiration and the courage to make the tent big enough for everyone.

To Download the “New Brunswick Blueprint for Action: Building a Foundation for Self-sufficiency” visit: [www.gnb.ca/cnb/promos/nptf/index-e.asp](http://www.gnb.ca/cnb/promos/nptf/index-e.asp)

For more information about the New Brunswick Poverty Reduction Strategy Roundtable visit: [www.gnb.ca/OOI7/promos/OOOI/index-e.asp](http://www.gnb.ca/OOI7/promos/OOOI/index-e.asp)