Social Economy Stories

February 2009

Walking on the Strength of One's Own Legs
with Roberto Lay

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. CCEDNet 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, CCEDNet 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 CCEDNet and the University of Victoria's BC Institute for Co-operative Studies, with several hundred research partners and projects throughout Canada.

The Social Economy stories published here are designed to provide practitioners' perspectives on what the Social Economy means to them and their communities. The first phase of this project produced seven stories written by CCEDNet's *Create*Action interns, based on interviews with practitioners in Canada's Social Economy. 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.

CCEDNet intends to develop a second phase of this project focusing on how the Social Economy creates solidarity within the country (i.e. between non-profits, CED organizations, credit unions, etc.) and how this inspires practitioners in their work. This phase will seek to highlight the voices of Aboriginal, immigrant and women practitioners in particular.

The Canadian CED Network

The Canadian Community Economic Development Network (CCEDNet) is a national, member-based organization committed to creating economic opportunities and enhancing social conditions in Canada. The membership of CCEDNet is made up of community groups, municipalities, foundations, CED practitioners and active citizens from every region of the country.

Community Economic Development (CED) is community-led action to create economic opportunities and better social conditions, particularly for those who are most disadvantaged.

To learn more about CCEDNet, please visit www.ccednet-rcdec.ca.

Acknowledgements

Roberto Lay is the Executive Director of the Institute for Development and Peace in the Amazon (IDPA), a social justice NGO located in San Martin, Peru. Born on the former Portuguese island of Macau to Chinese-Mexican-Peruvian parents, Roberto traveled extensively in Latin America before settling in Tarapoto, Peru. His deep appreciation for the Amazonian way of life has led Roberto to become a tireless champion of its cause. In the early 1990s, he was one of the first to denounce the human rights abuses connected with the involvement of the Fujimori government in the drug trade in the region. For more than 30 years Roberto has worked to foster sustainable community development based on food security and community empowerment.

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"Economy is necessary and so is striving after economic success, but the problem is that this success is being pursued to the exclusion of other concerns. The fruits of economic success are being accumulated and not distributed uniformly. The challenge is now to carry out a redistribution, and the means of this redistribution is the Social Economy—whereby economic activities are embedded in a strong matrix of solidarity, the person and the heart."

When Roberto moved to Tarapoto, the region was enduring a period of economic decline. People were lining up for sugar, rice and other basic goods while "local products were being left to rot in the fields, because the prices they would fetch were so low that it was not even worthwhile to harvest them," explains Lay.

In order to meet their most basic needs in the face of almost complete governmental inattention to the problems of the region, farmers soon turned to the cultivation of coca, a plant which is a source of cocaine. The outrageous incomes generated by the drug trade created a situation of delinquency, violence and corruption in the public sector. It also created an ideal set of conditions for the entry of armed groups such as the Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) and the Shining Path, to which the government responded with increasing militarization, eventually sparking an armed conflict in the area. As is often the case, the greatest victims of this conflict were civilians living in the affected regions, who fled their rural communities to settle in the town of Tarapoto. In a very short time, Tarapoto's 15 neighbourhoods swelled to over 100, all lacking in basic services and infrastructure.

The Institute for Development and Peace in the Amazon (IDPA) was founded in 1993 in order to address the extreme poverty in which these internally displaced persons found themselves. As their work progressed, the IDPA team began to realize that to achieve any measure of success they needed to respond to the particular circumstances of the communities and gain the full support and direct participation of the local people.

"The objective was to identify the items that we could work on together," says Lay. After much reflection and trial and error, the IDPA began to favour a development approach founded on food security. "First we had to produce what was ours - the crops which we consumed - and then we could see which of these crops would help us have a productive relationship with the market." A key element to the proposed agricultural development was the diversification of products to meet the needs of rural families during the lean periods.

"It's like the young child who says to his father 'you know what, I don't want you to hold my hand anymore; I want to walk with the strength of my own legs.'"

But the changes brought by new methods of production could not be limited to the merely technical; they also had to be accompanied by a more radical shift in values which - through a recovery of the Amazonian identity - re-created communal relationships with values of solidarity and mutual help.

This type of change is embodied in the concept of Choba Choba, which is central to the approach of the IDPA and recovery of the Amazonian solidarity model. Choba Choba is a system of mutual help where each person works for the benefit of everyone. "The solidarity expressed as Choba Choba is an Amazonian unity which produces food, cleans fields, sows seeds, harvests crops and shares knowledge and technologies through a friendly social grouping. Lay explains that the idea can be synthesized with the phrase: "I help you and you help me."

This type of structure reveals the importance of garnering the support of the public sector. "We believe that it is no longer possible to have a solidarity economy without breaking into the public sphere in a serious way, without prevailing upon government with community development strategies and having them sign on to common commitments." Solidarity shops and fairs, both of which act as vehicles for local culture and consumption, are examples of common commitments between communities and government which the IDPA has helped to implement.

For Lay, the Social Economy helps shorten some of the distance which currently exists between producers and consumers, and between these groups and their local governments. It is a process of continual coordination between individual actors which allows communities to be in control of their own development and to regain their economic sovereignty, because:

"To consume must not be just to swallow, to fatten oneself. What sense does this have? Where is the heart? To the contrary, correct consumption is an opportunity to develop new potentialities in solidarity with those who produce and who are elaborating a new alternative for their country, their region and the world. This is the meaning of ethical consumption: supporting communities in the creation of their own economies, their own development. In this way, communities are learning to walk by themselves. It's like the young child who says to his father 'you know what, I don't want you to hold my hand anymore; I want to walk with the strength of my own legs.' And that's what the Social Economy is about. It's walking on the strength of one's own legs."

This story is a summary of a longer article that will soon be available on the CCEDNet website at www.ccednet-rdec.ca.