

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 circles.

Social Economy Stories

February 2010

**Building Relationships
with Yvonne Chiu**

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. 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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Building Relationships

With Yvonne Chiu



Yvonne Chiu is Co-Executive Director of the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative in Edmonton, Alberta. It is a workers' co-op made up of immigrant community workers that support immigrants and refugees through health education, community development, and advocacy. The co-op offers various services to newcomers – in many languages and at no cost.

Yvonne Chiu has been working with newcomers in Edmonton since the early 1990's when she began working for a settlement agency in the city's Chinatown. Through this experience, and then later while working for the city's public health department, she began to realize that newcomers often had trouble accessing the healthcare and social services that they required.

Chiu found herself interviewing the families of newcomers and, in doing so, realized that there was a critical knowledge gap between these families and social and health service providers.

“The populations that are marginalized suffer from lack of political power, on one hand, and are quite invisible to the general population, on the other,” she explains. “So their struggles and their stories aren't heard and – in that invisibility – there's a lack of understanding between the immigrant population and the general public.”

Using this experience as a starting point, Yvonne was able to join with a group of skilled professionals with

strong connections to Edmonton's various newcomer communities. Together, they formed the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-op in 1998. The goal of the co-op was to act as a broker between newcomers and the systems that provide them with healthcare and social services.

“We deliberately chose the term brokers because the definition of a cultural broker is someone who links and mediates between two parties to not only minimize conflict, but to produce positive change for everyone,” says Chiu.

“My colleagues, who themselves are multilingual and familiar with the cultural realities of our communities, have situated themselves as a bridge between individual families and Canadian culture. In brokering, we create relationships between the two parties that often lead to both sides learning about each other and growing in the process.”

She says that the day-to-day work of the co-op falls into what she calls the “five dimensions of empowerment,” an idea taken from health promotion literature, but one that Yvonne believes is in harmony with the holistic and empowering values of the social economy.

In the first level of empowerment, co-op members interview families to develop a holistic understanding of what's in the way of achieving their visions for the future. They take family members to service providers who can help them overcome the barriers

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they face, and provide tools that empower them to achieve their goals. In this work, they strive to develop an equitable relationship between each family and service provider.

At the second and third levels of empowerment, the co-op members engage in community organizing. On one level, they create spaces for people facing similar challenges to come together for mutual support and collective learning, and, at a broader level, they work to build awareness and mobilization around common issues affecting their community.

The final two areas of empowerment involve advocacy for systemic change. At the fourth level, the co-op creates a network of service providers that cooperate and coordinate efforts to provide the holistic support that newcomer families need. Finally, the last level of empowerment involves advocating for a greater voice with the organizations providing services.

Yvonne recognises that none of these five levels presents a simple task, and that many challenges must be overcome before all five levels of empowerment can be realized in Edmonton's immigrant communities.

On the whole, Yvonne is optimistic about the future of the co-op. She says they have been talking to people at the Alberta Ministry of Employment and Immigration and the Ministry of Health about the social cooperative model from Italy's Emilia Romagna region. She says she would like to promote this idea of social co-ops, and maybe one day create an Albertan version of a social co-op. But, for now, their main focus is on effectively brokering for their communities.

"Our singular mission as a workers co-op is to build relationships," emphasizes Chiu; "relationships that remove the 'us versus them' mentality between communities and service providers. And, so, almost every single initiative that we have is either partnering with a public institution or a government entity, and bringing diverse partners together to illustrate the power of the collective, and the need to work together."

To learn more about the Multicultural Health Brokers Co-operative visit: www.mchb.org/OldWebsite2008/default.htm

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