

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 title 'Social Economy Stories' is printed in a bold, black, sans-serif font across the top of this rectangle.

Social Economy Stories

February 2010

**Rural Collectivity: A Different Kind of Economic Model
with David Bruce**

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.

This is the one of ten stories we are publishing in 2009/10 to provide practitioner perspectives on what the Social Economy means to them and their communities in the context of building an inclusive movement for social, economic and environmental change. In this phase of the project, we are particularly highlighting the voices of Aboriginal, women, and immigrant practitioners and those representing rural and northern communities, to help focus on the importance of the social economy (through its non-profit, cooperative, credit union and civil society organizations) to creating solidarity across Canada and internationally for an alternative people-centered movement for sustainable socio-economic development.

Phase one Social Economy stories can be found on the Canadian CED Network website, www.ccednet-rcdec.ca/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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Rural Collectivity: A Different Kind of Economic Model

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David Bruce is a member of the Atlantic Node of the Canadian Social Economy Hub and Director of the Rural and Small Town Programme (RSTP) at Mount Allison University. This program teaches individuals and organizations how to adapt to change and act on opportunities to develop sustainable rural communities and small towns. The program links research and action by generating and sharing knowledge, developing tools, and providing information and educational services, that lead to innovative approaches and solutions. Recently, the program completed a study on the impacts of low literacy rates in rural New Brunswick and created a series of student-produced videos about various aspects of rural community economic development.

From his office on the top floor of the Avard-Dixon Building at Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick, David Bruce is working to create stronger ties between academic researchers studying the Social Economy and the people in Atlantic Canada’s rural communities who are working to build it.

He says the Rural and Small Town Programme includes local community members and groups as equal partners in its projects. These partnerships serve to provide benefits for community partners and better inform the research.

“The community partner can benefit from the research expertise, as well as the broader knowledge and experience of the university partners who may have prior experiences in formulating policy or business strategies,” explains David. They are able to accomplish this “without the expensive cost of private sector consultants

assisting them with business development or feasibility studies.”

“When we’re talking about social economy enterprises, we’re talking about those that provide products and services, but are not focused on providing profits in the context of how we understand private business activities where return on investment is always the major driver,” he explains. “The connection on the social side is that you’re still running a profitable business, but there are social objectives, which can also be achieved.”

The Social Economy in rural Atlantic Canada follows these principles, and they manifest within the particular economic and social conditions of the region.

“Over the last ten to fifteen years in rural Atlantic Canada in particular with the ongoing shakeout of economic restructuring and the centralization of public services, there’s an increasing appetite for people to look outside the box of traditional private sector and public sector models,” he says.

“One example is the creation of a new public transit service in the Port Hawkesbury Strait area of Nova Scotia — the Strait Area Transit Co-operative. It was developed in response to the ongoing social and economic problems related to a lack of affordable transportation in that part of rural Nova Scotia.” Many people are looking for alternative responses to the prevailing social and economic conditions, and many people are engaged in activities within the social economy, but most of them do not refer to the social economy or identify as part of the social economy movement. Co-operatives and credit unions are prime examples of this; they simply identify

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as enterprises that are providing jobs and services for people who need them. While the more established co-operatives and credit unions have developed expertise and secured an important role in their communities over time, newly established and less traditional organizations taking on both entrepreneurial and social objectives can find it challenging to find the skills and resources they require within the communities they are trying to help.

“I think the big challenge for people living in rural communities is to become a bit more sophisticated around the development of the business models for potential social economy activities,” he says. “We lack enough people with professional experience in setting up and managing social economy enterprises because it’s a different business model and has a different look and feel in terms of understanding how to balance the economic imperative with the social outcomes you’re looking for.”

But these are the very challenges that the RSTP is designed to overcome. It is only one of a number of organizations and Canadian university-supported research bodies that are working to raise awareness of the social economy.

Often the contributions of such researchers are funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council as Community University Research Alliances (CURAs), which give academics greater access to the communities they study, and provide considerable advantages for community partners as well. But academic organizations, such as the RSTP, create links with community groups through informal partnerships and continuing dialogue.

David says that universities have three opportunities to further the social economy in local communities. The first involves providing expertise and advice to help community partners develop skills to sustainably achieve their goals. The second is by applying rigorous research methodology to measure the extent and impact of the Social Economy, and connect local efforts to regional, national, and global contexts. The third opportunity is to draw on this research by spreading the word about the Social Economy to the general public, to public policy makers and to local organizations.

“Given that across rural Canada, and in Atlantic Canada particularly, there is an ongoing economic shakeout and movement away from the dependability of large corporate employers, primarily in natural resource sectors,” he says, “I think that at some point we may revert to a smaller co-operative, social economy business model that makes it possible for small sawmills or fish plant operations to be viable. I’m not saying that it’s going to replace every job that’s been lost over the last twenty years – I think it would be folly to predict that – but I certainly think that it will provide an option for making it possible.”

For more information about the Rural and Small Town Programme visit: www.mta.ca/rstp/.

To view the Rural Community Economic Development videos produced by the Rural and Small Town Programme visit: www.mta.ca/rstp/nrevideos/engvideos.html.

To learn more about Community – University Partnerships visit: www.socialeconomyhub.ca/hub/