
**Community Economic Development and Employability
Corporation**

**Women on a Mission Cooperative
Case Study**

March 26, 2014



*Building stronger communities together!
Bâtir ensemble des communautés plus fortes*


CEDEC



Women on a Mission is a workers' cooperative started in 2013 by a small group of women living in Grosse-Île on the Magdalen Islands (Québec). There are two main services: a daycare service for local families and a café-boutique that serves both tourists and local residents. This case study chronicles its creation, its current situation and its on-going development, highlighting successes, challenges and lessons learned. It concludes with some recommendations for groups considering similar initiatives

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Case Study: Women on a Mission Cooperative

INTRODUCTION

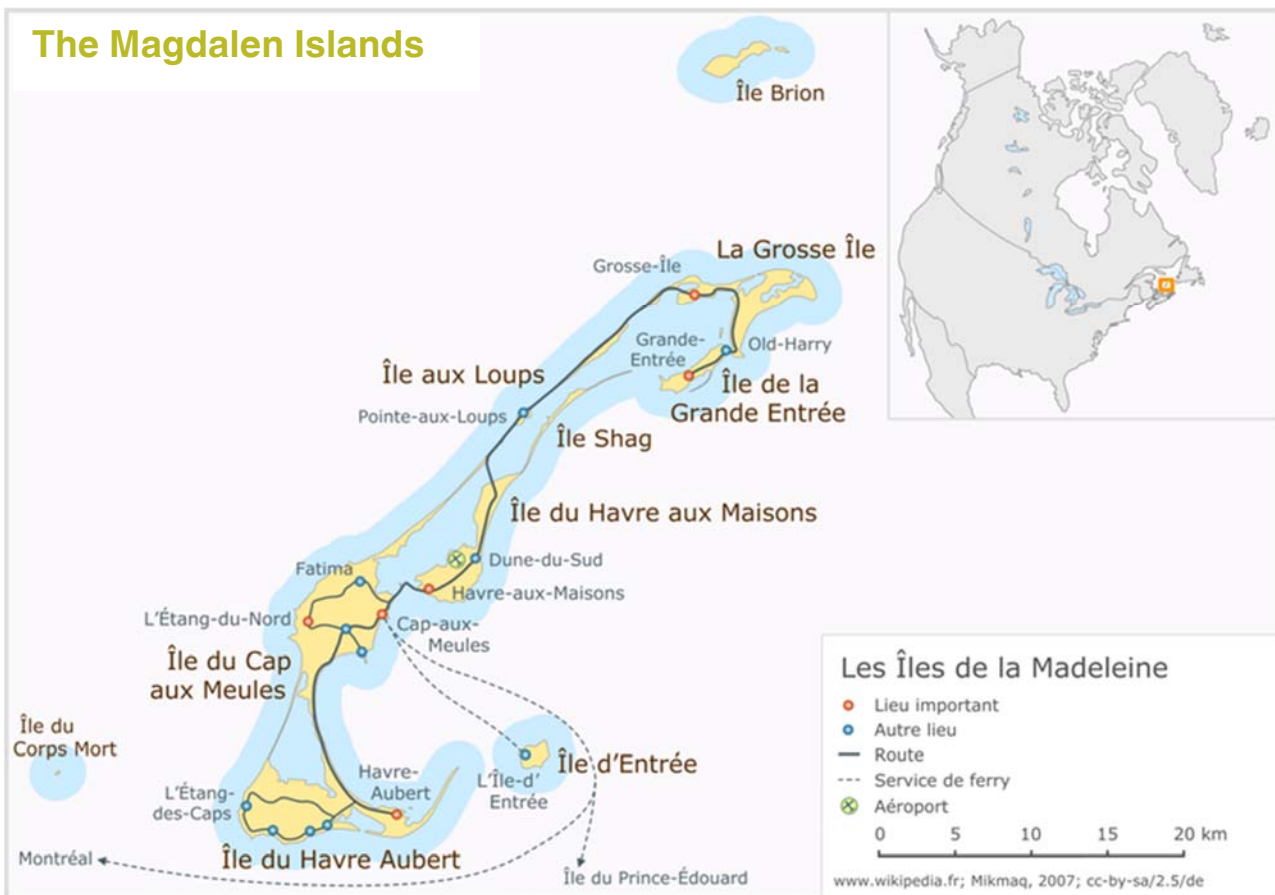
This case study was requested by CEDEC—the Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation—as part of its role in helping communities throughout Quebec to identify, assess, and prepare to act on social, cultural, and economic development opportunities. The content is based on interviews with members of the cooperative on Grosse-Île as well as with representatives of organizations that have supported them in one way or another at different steps in the process of imagining, creating, starting up and continually developing their cooperative. A total of ten people were interviewed, representing seven different organizations.



Source: Mary Richardson

THE ENVIRONMENT: THE COMMUNITY OF GROSSE-ÎLE

The community of Grosse-Île in the Magdalen Islands has a small population (490 in 2011) and most residents are English speakers. Grosse-Île is separated from the most populated islands to the south-west by a long, narrow spit of land, which takes about 45 minutes by car to travel. Many of the local residents work in the fisheries, seasonally, while others work in various other sectors of the economy; unemployment and underemployment are high compared to average rates for Quebec. Community members and local organizations perceived a need for economic development and job creation in the community. This is particularly true for women, who have few job opportunities in Grosse-Île and therefore few sources of income.



Source: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Magdalen_Islands.png

As an organization dedicated to community economic development and employability, CEDEC had been offering training workshops on business development in Grosse-Île, however these initiatives met with little interest from community members. This lack of interest led the CEDEC director to the conclusion that business development was not the best vehicle for job creation in the community. Although many community members have their own business in the fisheries or are employed by one, business

development in other sectors seems to be perceived as too high-risk and few people are willing to take such a large financial risk outside the fishing industry. As a historical economic activity practiced by almost all families over the generations, fishing is familiar and has a high degree of social support while other business ventures do not.

These observations led CEDEC to explore the social economy. Since the social economy is based on responding to the particular needs and circumstances of a community through collective means, it seemed to present opportunities that are better suited to the

situation of Grosse-Île residents. Rather than one person share the financial and work burden of starting a business, the work and the risk is shared, making the task less daunting. Another feature of the Grosse-Île community is the strong sense of solidarity among community members. This makes collective enterprises particularly well-suited to this community.

Fishing boats in port



Source: www.cruisesaintlawrence.com

PLANTING THE SEED

In March 2012, a community meeting was held to learn about the social economy. About eighteen people attended, all women. At that meeting, a local resource-person explained what the social economy is and attendees filled out a sheet indicating their interest in various topics (including tourism activities, energy production, child care services and senior services).

A second meeting was held to brainstorm ideas that community members were interested in pursuing. Then each idea was examined to see whether it could work in Grosse-Île and whether there was a need for it. Two areas for social enterprises were identified at this stage: child care and tourism.

A childcare needs assessment (survey of parents) was conducted in June 2012. It showed a need for day care services for 0-4 year olds, during the fishing season first and foremost, but ideally year-round, since some residents work year-round, in some cases at a significant distance. Some parents who do not currently work, still want their children to benefit from the opportunities for socialization, school readiness and other social advantages of daycare.

Motivations: Meeting community needs

The motivations for the project were twofold: 1) to create jobs and 2) to provide services for families. While many women wanted jobs, they particularly wanted to create valuable and meaningful employment where their skills would be put to use and their personal qualities recognized. They also wanted to create work that is reliable and stable, since work in the fisheries may vary from one year to the next and other employment is often low-skilled.

Alongside this desire for meaningful work was the fact that there was a lack of day care services in the community, making it difficult for women (who often do much of the child care) to work outside the home. The project therefore took shape around these two main needs and aimed from the outset to respond to them.

Another factor in developing the project was people's personal motivations. A couple of the group members had previously worked in the food industry in restaurants, inns or fast-food outlets and wanted to create employment in that sector. A couple others had experience in education and wanted to work with children. However, no one was willing or able to invest a large sum of money or to have the business fall entirely on their shoulders.

Successes

- ⇒ Recognizing that any project has to be grounded in community needs and interests.
- ⇒ Gathering information on the social economy and organizing sessions to explore ideas.
- ⇒ Making sure that the project fits well with people's motivations.

Challenges faced

- ⇒ Lack of interest in developing privately-owned businesses.
- ⇒ Recognizing that private business development was not well suited to this community's realities.

Lessons learned

- ⇒ Start from local needs and capacities!

GROWING THE PROJECT

The social economy includes many different possibilities, so it was important to find the right one to fit the motivations and realities of community members. The group initially looked at forming a non-profit organization, but there are already some in the community, and under non-profit rules board members cannot be employees, and therefore cannot be paid. Since one of the main objectives was job creation by and for group members, this did not fit well with their expectations.

Deciding on a cooperative structure

It quickly became evident that a cooperative would be the best legal structure for the project. A cooperative involves very little personal financial risk and enables members to be their own bosses. In the case of a workers' cooperative, the board is composed of workers so control remains in their hands.

Support for developing the cooperative was provided by the Coopérative de développement régional (CDR), an organization that provides general support to cooperative enterprises. To begin with, a CDR advisor provided information about the Quebec *Cooperatives Act* so that the group could reflect on various decisions they would have to make regarding the cooperative structure. For instance, they had to have at least three founding members (there

First steps



Source: Women on a Mission

were six in this case). They needed to decide on governance structures, such as how the board is constituted and how decisions will be made. They also had to decide how they would divide up the jobs available, since the cooperative cannot always provide full-time jobs for all members.

Once these sorts of basic decisions were made, business plans needed to be developed since a cooperative is a business that provides goods or services for sale and must therefore be financially feasible.

Steps in founding a cooperative

The steps in the process of founding the cooperative are as follows:

1. We have a project or idea
 - a. Does it meet a need?
 - b. Who wants to be involved?
 - c. What are our motivations?
2. Decide on the structure
 - a. What structure best suits our project? (explore different options)
 - b. Is it a cooperative?
 - c. If so, what type of cooperative (workers, producers, consumers or solidarity)?
3. Do a business plan
 - a. Various economic development organizations (SADC, CLD, CDR) and business training programs can help with this step.
 - b. Include considerations such as cost, equipment needed, location, etc.
4. Apply to be constituted as a cooperative
 - a. Fill out forms, including the type of cooperative, the project description (background, how many members, how many jobs will be created, etc.)
 - b. Make a proposal for governance structure (ex: How many shares will there be? How many seats will there be on the board (between 3 and 15)? How will administrators be elected?)
5. Hold the inaugural meeting
 - a. Elect the board.
 - b. Decide on the auditor.
 - c. Write up the meeting minutes.
6. Hold the first board meeting
 - a. Two main resolutions need to be adopted: one to open a bank account, and another to designate the members who can sign cheques.
 - b. Elect a president and vice-president.
 - c. Now you have all legal formalities to function (you can receive grants, sign cheques, etc.)

Garnering support

Once these conditions for starting operations are met, the cooperative can proceed in creating the businesses as planned. This often requires support from organizations that can become partners in ensuring project success. In the case of Women on a Mission, several organizations have been key in providing much-needed support.

CEDEC has provided information, training, motivation and leadership from the outset and continues to do so.

Coopérative de développement régional was instrumental in providing information and advice for the development of the cooperative. It remains a resource for the cooperative, as needed.

Centre local de développement acted as an advisor, answering questions, providing feedback as needed, as well as some funding.

Société d'aide au développement des collectivités (SADC) has a 15,000\$ envelope per year for the English-speaking community, some of which was allocated to the creation of the cooperative and can be used for projects, if relevant.

Caisse populaire became involved when the cooperative members went to open an account. They too provide information, advice and feedback, as was seen with the cooperative's business plan. An employee who is English-speaking and who has expertise in business development supported them with advice and coaching as needed.

CAMI (Council for Anglophone Magdalen Islanders) provides the cooperative with space for the café-boutique free of cost and has also obtained funding to contract the cooperative to do certain jobs for the community. As a community organization, CAMI is a supportive and close partner.

Municipality of Grosse-Île provides free office space and internet service.

Community members: People donated items for the daycare (toys, furniture) and the community raised money for the start-up.

Community Learning Centre has also provided support for the creation of the cooperative.

Start-up

This step was taken more quickly than originally imagined. Once the cooperative was incorporated, operations started up very soon after. Because the timing seemed right and opportunities presented themselves (funding, space, etc.), the women chose to move ahead quickly in spite of the amount of work that needed to be done in a very short amount of time. The cooperative was incorporated on March

1 and the daycare opened on April 1 with nine children registered. The café opened on June 30. In both cases, equipment had to be bought or obtained by donation, paperwork had to be completed, permits approved, and spaces made ready. This was the source of much stress.

The work was distributed by availability and skills. One woman has a DEP (technical training diploma) in accounting so she does the book-keeping, budgets and financial statements. Another has post-secondary training in education and is good at writing (funding proposals for instance). Another woman previously owned a restaurant and is good with people, so she often makes phone calls and has skills in cooking and restaurant management. Another has also worked in food services and is good at organizing and manual work. In addition, CEDEC was able to hire a social economy development agent in 2013 with funds from Emploi Quebec to help with the paperwork. The partners all went above and beyond the call of duty. Everybody wanted to see it work.

Due to the amount of work and stress, cooperative members are ambivalent about whether this quick start-up was a mistake or not. In retrospect, it does not seem well-advised, but they are now reaping the rewards because they are well-prepared for their second season. They know what to expect and their routines are established.

Getting started



Source: Women on a Mission

Successes

- ⇒ In spite of the tight schedule and the amount of work, both businesses were able to start up within the first year.
- ⇒ Cooperative members have complementary skills and interests and shared the workload.
- ⇒ The accounting is all set up on Simply Accounting and is going very well.
- ⇒ They are successfully managing a 100,000\$ budget and have a small surplus.
- ⇒ Partner organizations work well together in a spirit of collaboration rather than competition.
- ⇒ The local organizations supporting the cooperative (CAMI and CEDEC) know CLD and SADC (and other government) programs, and are skilled at navigating their requirements. They know how to fit into funding frameworks and are very professional in their work.

Challenges faced

- ⇒ Huge amount of work: very long hours, high stress, new responsibilities and unpaid work in the beginning. This can test people's patience; frustrations and resentments can easily take over.
- ⇒ Keeping people involved and committed when they are giving so many volunteer hours and not necessarily getting employment.
- ⇒ Two people resigned (one worked full-time and did not have an interest anymore; the other did not see what role she could play).
- ⇒ Learning all the government paperwork, some of which is not available in English.
- ⇒ Learning how to organize meetings, prepare an agenda, take minutes, and more.
- ⇒ Finances are complicated because there are two separate businesses with four or five budgets.
- ⇒ At one point, the two businesses (tourism and daycare) became quite separate. Unfortunately, this created the challenge of members no longer having a good overview of the whole cooperative.
- ⇒ Maintaining motivation: at times the motivation has been difficult to keep up.
- ⇒ The quick start-up did not leave enough time to do marketing and promotion, which has had an impact on viability.

Lessons learned

- ⇒ It takes a lot of volunteer hours to get a business going. Make sure potential members know this and are willing to commit the time and energy. Make sure they are in it for the long haul.
- ⇒ Maintain communication within the group. Have meetings to vent frustrations, clear the air, and express feelings.
- ⇒ If possible, find someone outside the group who can be a supportive listener.
- ⇒ It's OK for people to leave the coop if they do not see where they fit in.
- ⇒ Some people who are not being employed by the cooperative may choose to remain because they want to contribute to its success and may later on become employed by it.
- ⇒ Respect people's confidentiality (especially important in small communities).
- ⇒ Not everyone needs to be at every meeting if the agenda concerns details they are not involved in. However, there should be an update at each meeting so everyone knows what is going on.
- ⇒ When faced with obstacles, be innovative, be solution-oriented.
- ⇒ There are many skills and capacities that members may need to acquire, depending on past work experience. Expect that they will need more support in the beginning and find organizations that can provide it.
- ⇒ Find out what support partners can provide and be strategic and inclusive. It could be useful at the outset to ask the organizations: where do you see yourself being involved, how do you see your role, how can you support it?
- ⇒ Do more fundraising at the outset to build the project. This would give more start-up cash.
- ⇒ Take the time needed to prepare the project properly. Be realistic in your time frames. That said, you cannot know everything in advance, so you may have to step outside your comfort zone and dive in when the timing is in your favour.

BEARING FRUIT: THE CURRENT SITUATION

In 2013 the daycare opened from April to July, for a 15-week period. It reopened in January 2014 and is currently running year-round. The café-boutique is open during summer months for the tourist season.

Multiplying activities

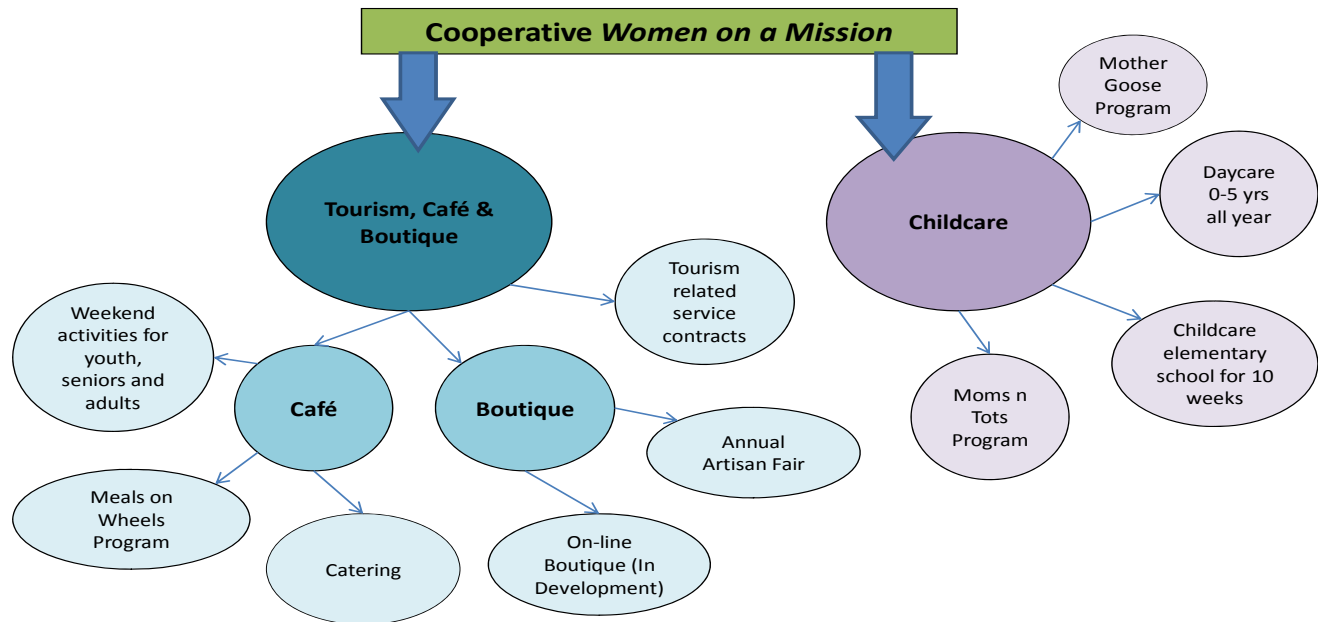
In addition to the basic activities, each business has secondary activities. The daycare has the 0-4 year old program for pre-schoolers, year-round. It also runs a child care service at the school for elementary students during the fishing season when some parents are not at home during lunch-time and after school. There is also a Moms and Tots program funded by Avenir d'enfant for parents with young children.

The café provides meals on-site to tourists and community members, but it also offers catering services as requested. In addition, it provides Meals on Wheels to seniors as well as weekend activities for youth, seniors and adults. The craft boutique is located in the same building, and sells locally-made crafts. They organize an annual artisan fair and are preparing an on-line boutique.



Source: Women on a Mission

This diagram gives an idea of the current structure:



Learning curve

With the experience of the past year, the women feel much more confident about what to expect for the coming year. They have gained significant skills and knowledge in a wide array of areas: budgeting, grant writing, project management, human resource management, time management and much more. But the intangible learning is just as real. They have gained self-confidence, they are able to speak for themselves and they have acquired professional attitudes and skills. They take more initiative, they work on their own and they share ideas. These capacities are transferable skills for jobs in other fields. As this experience continues, more *savoir-faire* and *savoir-être* will be gained and training may be needed to facilitate this.

Successes

- ⇒ They have experience for the second year of operation, with a clear picture of what they need to know and do.
- ⇒ The women have become much more independent and do not need as much coaching as in the beginning. Their capacity has grown significantly.
- ⇒ This community economic development initiative led to the creation of eight jobs.
- ⇒ Services have been added to the community.
- ⇒ Partnerships have been secured.
- ⇒ Community support has been excellent.
- ⇒ These projects enable the cooperative to respond to a community need, a social need and an economic need.

Current challenges

- ⇒ Obtaining a commercial permit for the daycare. A first application was refused but a second one is being prepared with the support of CAMI.
- ⇒ The café venue is small and somewhat hidden (in the basement of a building in the historical complex), making it harder to attract tourists.
- ⇒ The café and boutique did not generate enough income to cover expenses in the first year.
- ⇒ Promoting and marketing the businesses needs to be stepped up.

Lessons learned

- ⇒ Recognize that you don't have all the answers and reach out to people who may. Find who has the answers.
- ⇒ Don't be afraid to rethink ideas. You may need to shift if something is not working or is not feasible. Focus on something that you can obtain.

Café and boutique "Whitecaps"



Source: Mary Richardson

SEEDS FOR THE FUTURE

As Women on a Mission looks forward to the next stage in its growth, various ideas are taking shape. They first need to be stabilized and then to build on what they have consolidated. They would like to expand the daycare. They also would like to develop a bed and breakfast. And they want to create an on-line boutique to sell arts and crafts from local artisans. Developing products could be part of this, particularly in the food sector (for example cranberry products).

Capacity building

To continue growing and being successful, different types of skills and knowledge will be needed. Business promotion and marketing are areas where training could be helpful. Some on-going support with financial management could also be beneficial. Leadership training is an area where capacity could be built, for example as it relates to cooperation, team-building and internal communications.

Being able to contact, and perhaps visit, other similar initiatives, particularly if they are run by women, would be inspiring and motivating. Experiences could be shared with these other cooperative ventures. Since the social economy is still a new concept for community members, and since the Magdalen Islands are isolated geographically, and the English-speaking community can be isolated linguistically, inspiration from outside appears to be an important source of knowledge and motivation.

Future challenges

The future of the community—and the Magdalen Islands in general—is somewhat uncertain, given the continuing population decline and the lack of employment opportunities. Many people, both Francophone and Anglophone, leave the islands, particularly as reforms to employment insurance reduce benefits in a context where seasonal employment is a reality for many. Many younger people go west to find higher-paying, longer-term employment or jobs in their field of study.

Because of these broader economic and social realities, the future of the daycare for instance is uncertain. Over the next five years the school predicts that the number of children will drop from 44 to 17. This will no doubt force the cooperative members to adjust to changing circumstances and therefore shift the goods and services they offer. As the population ages, it may well be that the needs of seniors become more central to activities, or that tourism-related activities expand.

CONCLUSION

Women on a Mission is still a very young cooperative, and while much of its trajectory remains to be seen, it certainly has experienced success in its start-up and first year of operation. This success is due to many factors, as we can see above in the lists of successes, challenges faced, and lessons learned.

Conditions contributing to the success of Women on a Mission

When asked what has made the cooperative a success, interviewees for this case study mentioned many different conditions. Some of these may apply to other cooperative ventures and others may not.

- ⇒ The cooperative is meeting needs in the community, not creating needs.
- ⇒ The cooperative members have a strong desire to create employment and services for the community.
- ⇒ They have complementary skills and the work is shared according to people's strengths.
- ⇒ Cooperative members and partner organizations work as a team, each organization providing support in its area of expertise in a spirit of collaboration. The roles are clear.
- ⇒ There is a high level of community solidarity. People stick together and support each other. This is important because cooperatives depend on people using the services.
- ⇒ As a small community, the environment is favourable to this kind of venture, and there is not much competition.
- ⇒ Members have found efficient ways to communicate and plan together. For example, they have created a Facebook group which they use to send messages to all members for everyday things (what needs to be done, what do we need, when do we schedule the next meeting....). In this way people can check messages when they are available.
- ⇒ They have talent. The food is said to be "fabulous" and there is potential for growing beyond the community of Grosse-Île.
- ⇒ Grosse-Île is said to be a community of strong women who are very involved in their community. For example, half of the municipal council members are women and the mayor is a woman too. This is rare in municipal politics in Quebec.
- ⇒ Grosse-Île is attractive for tourism with the biggest wharf on the islands, beautiful landscape, beaches, and more.

Recommendations for similar initiatives

So what lessons can be extracted from this experience for other groups considering creating a business in the social economy or for organizations that can support them?

Planting the seed

1. Start from local needs and capacities! Make sure that the project fits well with people's motivations as well as their skills.
2. Make sure that the group shares a vision of what they want. Make sure group members are compatible.
3. Gather information on the social economy and take time to explore ideas. Reach out to people and organizations that can help you do this.
4. It takes a lot of volunteer hours to get a business going. Make sure potential members know this and are willing to commit the time and energy. Make sure they are in it for the long haul. Make people feel like it can happen, it is possible.
5. Take the time needed to prepare the project properly, to put things in place.
6. Find out what support partners can provide. Ask them where they see themselves being involved, how they see their role, how they can support you. Then, be strategic: target them for support in the areas where they have the most expertise, and in a way that complements the expertise of other groups.

Letting it grow

1. Maintain communication within the group. Make sure that all members are informed of important developments. Share the work. Find ways to deal quickly and constructively with misunderstandings or frustrations. If possible, find someone outside the group who can be a supportive listener.
2. Provide for ways to acquire the skills and capacities that members need. Recognize that you don't have all the answers and reach out to people who may.
3. If possible raise enough funds at the outset to build the project so that the business has some financial wiggle room.

Changing

1. Allow for people to leave the cooperative and expect that some may decide it is not their place.
2. When faced with obstacles, be innovative and solution-oriented.
3. Don't be afraid to rethink ideas. You may need to shift if something is not working or is not feasible. Focus on something that you can obtain.

Adapting to your environment

1. In a small rural community, it is important to find locally relevant solutions that work on a small scale, with small population and resources available.
2. In more urban settings, it tends to be harder for cooperatives to survive because users have too many other competing options and can easily be influenced by a lower price elsewhere. Cooperatives depend on members using the services.

Fun at daycare



Source: Women on a Mission