

FULL PARTNERS

After 20 years of hard work, CED is a force to be reckoned with in Québec

by Nancy Neamtan

Editor's note: this article is closely based on the text of a speech made by the author March 23, 2001 at the CCEDNet National Policy Forum in Vancouver.

I HAVE BEEN INVOLVED IN CED initiatives since 1984, and in community development issues since 1969. When I first met people like Stewart Perry, David Pell, and Mike Lewis over 15 years ago, we were so much more spry, with so much less gray hair and so much less “valuable experience.” I didn’t need glasses to read my speeches and nobody took my words of wisdom very seriously.

The advantage of experience is that people do tend to take you more seriously. The disadvantage is that sometimes we begin to take ourselves too seriously.

So give me a break. Don’t take my what I say too seriously. Let’s continue to believe that we are still at the beginning of something - which, I am convinced, we really are. It may be that we baby boomers may not have all the necessary energy to finish what we began. But the best news, I think, is that next generation is already getting set to ask us to move on!

I have been asked to explain how I and many other practitioners in Québec have tried to integrate policy issues into everyday work, and how that has permitted significant innovations and advances. In the mid-’80s, there were a very small number of dispersed CED initiatives. Today, CED, local development, the social economy, and other components related to a movement for economic democracy have become an essential part of the Québec reality. How did we make that move?

To talk about local development, regional development, and even economic development in Québec today, even the most hard-nosed, traditional economic developers are obliged to “deal” with representatives of social movements and CED. Local and regional development policies must now have a component for community enterprise or the social econ-

omy. Bernard Landry, the new premier of Québec, has made the fight against poverty and the development of the social economy an important part of his political rhetoric (despite his profound attraction for gatherings like those of the World Economic Forum). Despite the context of globalization, multilateral accords, and free trade agreements, empowerment

and collective control of the economy have become an integral part of discussions not only within Québec society, but also in our growing international exchanges with Europe, Latin America, and other continents. How does one explain all that?

The first and most obvious response to the link between our CED practices



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and public policy is that one must never forget that we are not alone. What happens in our communities is an integral part of what is happening on this planet. It is impossible to have sustainable success locally if we do not link up to what is happening on a regional, national, and international level.

Let me describe what has been going on in Québec in the field of CED over the past 15-20 years, how we have linked community practice and public policy work, and more precisely, where we are at today.

EARLY YEARS

CED began in the early to mid-'80s in Québec as an outgrowth of the community movement. Community groups had played a very important role in the late '60s and '70s, in a wide range of areas. They were active in the defence of welfare and tenants rights, the creation of cooperative housing, women's rights, health issues and alternative health services, recreation, popular education, literacy, and so on.

Only in the '80s, however, as we came out of yet another terrible economic recession, did certain community activists and organizations begin to talk about the need to get involved directly in economic development, and to do so on the basis of the values and approaches that lie at the heart of community development.

The organizational forms varied. The first CED corporations in Montreal's poorest neighbourhoods tried to play a leadership role in comprehensive economic and social development strategies. From Victoriaville emerged a community development corporation strategy in which community organizations regrouped to gain recognition for the economic role that they were already playing. A multitude of organizations worked around issues of training and labour market strategies that led them inevitably to deal with economic and entrepreneurial issues.

This period was principally one of experimentation and learning by doing. Government support was generally limited to pilot projects based on local or regional mobilizations. Even when government money was available, it had a strong tendency to be attached to program delivery and not to community priorities or community empowerment. In 1984 a small group of community organizers in Pointe St-Charles founded the first CED corporation in an urban setting. The government offered us money to do private business development. We took it - but we did other things with it, which we got away with because of strong community support.

Yet despite the fact that our initiatives were sporadic and very new, we had already begun to network. In addition to practitioners in Québec, we networked with other social movements, particularly the community movement, the women's movement and the union movement, and with practitioners in the rest of Canada, the United States, and in Europe.

This networking allowed us to borrow and to adapt many of the best practices we had learned about. It also enabled us to better understand the common threads of what might seem to be very diverse initiatives. These common threads are the fundamentals of CED - things like

- a bottoms-up approach to development based on community empowerment.
- linking social and economic development.
- support to local entrepreneurship in all its forms.

EXPANSION

Toward the end of the '80s we began to feel confined by the marginality in which we worked. The social movements that were our natural allies were still somewhat mistrustful of community groups' incursions into economic development.

Most people in government knew nothing about what we were doing. Those who did thought we were dedicated and idealistic, but a little out to lunch.

If we wanted to move forward in our practices, we needed some more engaging public policy and we needed to create new partnerships. We tried several initiatives.

Firstly, we made ourselves visible in a somewhat spectacular way by co-organizing with a French network an international conference on local development. "Local Action," as the event was billed, brought together close to 800 people from across North America and Europe. It was a big show with a huge range of participants. Western native groups attended, as did Black groups from American inner cities, French rural initiatives, Italian manufacturing networks - even the Mayor of Boston, who had supported very innovative CED initiatives in his city.

We invited the politicians to open up the show. And they came, of course. It blew their minds to discover that what we were doing in Pointe St-Charles was happening elsewhere. So they decided that maybe they should get on the bandwagon, even if they still didn't really understand what we were talking about.

While working to improve our visibility, we worked on building alliances. We started up our first CED investment fund in collaboration with three Montreal CED corporations and the Québec Solidarity Fund, a union-controlled investment fund created in 1984. We had already begun working with local labour unions and the Montreal Labour Council around issues that concerned them directly, such as industrial retention and prevention of shop closures. We had also begun to work with some representatives of the private sector, not just locally (once again) but with the Montreal Chamber of Commerce. These activities enabled us

to identify leaders that were very open to social issues and to social development.

The increased visibility and new partnerships had a major impact at the policy level. The municipal governments of Montreal and Québec City both became consistently supportive of CED. Montreal formulated a municipal policy called "Partners for the Socio-economic Development of Our Neighbourhoods." It permitted the creation of several more CED organizations to cover all Montreal neighbourhoods, except the downtown business district. The federal and provincial governments also supported a wider range of CED "pilot projects." (In Montreal's Southwest, we were a pilot project for almost 15 years.) There was a growing recognition on the part of government and our natural allies, including the union movement, community organizations, and a growing range of other social movements, that CED was here to stay.

RECOGNITION

From 1989 to 1996, more and more communities began to organize around a CED perspective. More and more concrete results emerged from the work being done. Most importantly, the seeds that we had planted grew stronger and stronger roots in our community.

In the Southwest, our organization increased from several dozen community groups, private businesses, and local unions, to over 1000 individuals and over 300 organizations and enterprises. Our action diversified into more and more areas: investment, human resource development, community businesses, urban planning, partnerships with the private sector, battles to prevent factory closings, literacy initiatives in the workplace, and microcredit. We took on anything that our community felt was important for its social and economic development and for its control over that

development. This was always a fundamental part of our mission.

The same kind of innovation was occurring in many communities with increasing success and an increasing number of partners.

By the mid-'90s we were once again ready to move on to a new stage. There were many reasons to do so, but one factor was pre-eminent. Due to our valiant efforts and our roots in the community, CED and all forms of democratic economics that integrate social and economic goals were being taken more seriously. Nevertheless, we still were not taking part in the "serious discussions" among "serious people" about "serious business." This was true in government.

The CED movement has a lot to offer & a lot to say. The challenge is making sure we say it, & that we repeat it - again & again. The challenge is to get all our allies on board so that they understand the links between all the different concerns & struggles.

It was also true in the dialogues on-going between labour, business, and government on a whole series of issues, such as labour force development, investment strategies, business development, and other questions that had major impacts on our CED practices.

1996 was another watershed year for us. We were able to profit from a specific context and a specific event to demonstrate to all of Québec society the capacity that had been building over the past dozen years and the tremendous potential for CED in communities across Québec.

That event was the Summit on Employment and the Economy, con-

vened by the Québec premier Lucien Bouchard. The Summit brought together all the major institutions and leaders of Québec society to work on solutions to the economic crisis and to high levels of unemployment rate. The story of the Summit is a great one in itself. Suffice it to say that the growth of community-based economic initiatives and the power of an anti-poverty movement led by women's organizations secured a place at the table for representatives of social movements and CED networks. Subsequent to a conference in March on the elimination of the provincial deficit, we were even given the responsibility of a working group to prepare proposals for the Summit in October.

The body was entitled Chantier de l'économie sociale or the Social Economy Working Group. ("Chantier" literally translates as "construction site.") Although I was the one supposed to set it up and preside over it, I wasn't too sure what it meant at first. I knew what other people thought it meant. Government people thought we would work on strategies for workfare or new employment programs for the unemployed.

Very quickly, however, I discovered that "social economy" was an old term (common in Europe) that referred to all collective forms of economic activity. That includes the co-operative movement, the nonprofit sector, mutuals - in

other words, all forms of economic activity that are neither private, for-profit initiatives, nor public, government-controlled activities. That was enough for me. At last we had the opportunity to show our stuff in the big leagues and to prove that community-based economic development should and can be an essential element in the economic and social development of Québec.

A lot of other people also understood the opportunity that was before us. CED networks, union representatives, environmental groups, women's groups, youth organizations, the co-operative movement, social housing networks, forestry co-ops, daycare, rural networks and many others - over 200 people pitched in. Over six short months, they pulled together concrete projects and strategies that demonstrated the enormous capacity to develop innovative solutions to community needs, to environmental needs, and to the need for job creation and economic development. All our projects were based on social entrepreneurship and required diverse forms of government support: investment, new program development, changes in legal frameworks or in regulatory policy.

When we presented it at the Summit, our final report, "Osons la solidarité" ("Taking on the Challenge of Solidarity") received unanimous support and great media coverage. It committed us as practitioners to a specific agenda, but also government and government policy to supply the necessary support. For our report contained major policy recommendations relating to how, in future, the social economy should colour the way Québec does local and regional economic development. Five recommendations were paramount:

- The social economy should be recognized as an integral part of the socio-economic structure of Québec. In addressing the issues of Québec's socio-economic development, the status of

full partner should be confirmed for those involved in the social economy and they should be adequately represented in all partnerships and joint initiatives.

- Government departments and institutions should recognize social economy organizations and enterprises as full stakeholders and commit themselves in overcoming the prescriptive and administrative barriers that restrict the access of social economy enterprises to certain forms of government assistance.
- Government bodies should allow nonprofits to have access to loan guarantees and other programs in order to form new partnerships between financial institutions, private enterprises, and stakeholders in the social economy.
- A portion of regional development budgets should be allocated to the social economy in order to equip regions and local communities with tools and measures geared to the requirements of development and community needs.
- The Social Economy Working Group should receive the mandate to follow up on the above recommendations.

In addition, the Summit allowed us to initiate the creation of two major development tools. The first is an investment fund called RISQ (Réseau d'investissement social du Québec or the Quebec Social Investment Network). RISQ invests exclusively in co-operative and non-profit community businesses. Its capital, that will soon reach the \$10 million level, comes from private sector donations and from the Québec government.

The second major tool is the Comité sectoriel de main-d'oeuvre de l'économie sociale et de l'action communautaire (Sectoral Committee on Labour Force Development for the Social Economy and Community Development). Its aim is to develop and implement sectoral training and action strategies for community-

based organizations and social enterprises through a co-ordinated and organized approach to labour development. This committee, funded by labour force development money, has allowed us to better understand and respond to training needs of workers, managers, and volunteers in the community development field, including CED.

In terms of government support, there is no doubt that the Québec Summit helped us take a big step forward. It was the impetus for major new programs for the nonprofit and co-operative sector in daycare, social housing, home care, and the environment. It secured some money for smaller but innovative initiatives, and a bit more for a variety of new community or co-operative start-ups. A recent evaluation shows that this action plan has led to the creation of over 15,000 jobs and 1,000 new initiatives. The Québec government is aware of this success. The budget to be brought down next week, in addition to responding to public pressure to fight poverty, should give us more tools and more cash to work with in developing and consolidating the social economy.

PLANTING A FOREST

So the news is rather good. There is some money out there, although not enough. There are some new policies as well, but not enough.

One problem we have had is getting the federal government on board. Through the regional development office, linked to Industry Canada, the federal government is supporting a very active Community Futures program as well as financing many CED organizations in urban areas. But they have yet to make the leap toward financing the social economy through project development, capital investment, or core funding. There is still a strong line that says that high tech and exports are the only real way to do economic development in our communities.

Yet when I reflect on the years since the Summit, the most important step forward seems to have occurred on another level. Independent evaluators of the impact of the Chantier's action plan have recently confirmed what I have always suspected: the most important outcome of the summit and the work of the Chantier has been the recognition, of legitimacy, of our very right to exist.

If we want our practices to move forward and to have a significant impact, if we want public policy to change - the most important hurdle we still face to achieving these goals is the very legitimacy of our action.

broad sense in dealing with government and other partners. Our board of directors is made up of representatives of community and co-operative business networks, networks of local and CED organizations, regional delegates, and representatives from the union movement, the women's movement, the community movement, the co-operative movement, the environmental movement, and a few others. This has not taken away from the autonomy of these organizations. But it enabled us to discuss broader issues and to define more clearly our common bonds.

In January 2001, almost five years after the Economic Summit, we published the

sector and job substitution with the public sector, for example. It also examines the links between the old co-operative movement and the social economy, and how the former sometimes feels threatened by the increasing importance of the latter. This document has had a wide distribution and is being systematically discussed in unions, community networks, CED networks - even in government!

All this work has a very specific goal: to build a movement strong enough to begin to have an impact on our model of development. All the work being done in CED is great. But one fundamental question keeps me and others awake at night. How do we be sure that we are not just there to help right-wing governments manage the problem of poverty? How can we make sure that our work will contribute to changing the way development happens

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That will not be achieved simply by best practice, or by talking to government bureaucrats, or by policy papers. The CED and social economy movement will develop on the condition that it becomes strong enough to question the very framework of traditional development models being pursued in our communities, our regions, and our provinces. CED will develop if the union movement, the environmental movement, the women's movement, and other organized movements understand how their struggles are linked to ours, and that our form of action is just another expression of the values they cherish.

Those are the very reasons that led to the Chantier de l'économie sociale becoming a permanent organization. Today the Chantier is a nonprofit umbrella organization whose mission is to promote the social economy in all its forms, to bring together a wide variety of networks and social movements that believe in more democratic forms of economic development, and to represent this movement in a

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position paper "Osons de nouveau" ("Taking on the Challenge Once Again") to set out an analytical framework for action. This document begins to develop a vision of the kind of economy we would like to see, and of the kind of relationship we would like to see between government and civil society. It identifies major challenges and issues: access to capital, the need to reinforce tools for community-based economic initiatives, access to markets, and so on. It also takes on certain controversial questions that have been barriers to full support from certain sectors of society. It addresses the question of "unfair competition" with the private

in our communities, in our country, and across the world?

It seems to me that the current context is full of opportunities. I realize that I am talking from a Québec perspective. As a distinct society we do have more reason to believe than those from Ralph Klein or Mike Harris country. On the other hand, important progress has also been made in other provinces in the past five years. Moreover, consider the rapid growth and increasing influence of the movements in opposition to savage globalization. Look at how movements in different countries are talking more and more about the need for new forms of globalization based on

solidarity, and about new ways of doing economic and social development. Look at what emerged from the recent conference in Porte Alegre in Brazil, where movements from across the planet demanded a greater role for civil society in development. If you take stock of all these factors, it seems to me that the CED movement has a lot to offer and a lot to say.

The challenge is making sure we say it, and that we repeat it - again and again. The challenge is to get all our allies on board so that they understand the links between all the different concerns and struggles. The challenge is to get as much as we can from government policy locally and nationally, so that we can build more successes and bring more people into the work being done. By so doing, we will convince all our allies and the population in general that

they have the capacity to be active participants in their own development.

I think that it is possible in the next years to make big steps forward. In Québec we have made some important gains but there is lots more to do. In Europe the same phenomenon is very evident in many countries. It started in France, Belgium, Germany, Sweden, Spain, Portugal, and Italy, and is now being integrated into the discussions of the European Community. Even at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development there is increasing discussion of community-based economic development from a policy perspective - it can no longer be avoided. In some former Soviet-bloc countries, such as Poland, this approach to development is being used to rebuild civil society.

So let's not give up hope - on the contrary. The seeds have been sown; we have harvested some successes. We will harvest many more. As each tree grows and takes root, so will the forest. We must continue this work. But we must also make sure that we have a view of the forest, and that we learn to understand its overall development and how it fits into the landscape. If we learn to do that, and to articulate it well, I am confident that CED and the social economy will have an important role to play in a sustainable and democratic development of our local communities and the entire global community. 

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