

# Building Bridges – Inside & Outside CCEDNet

*The 2006 National Conference on CED & the Social Economy*

BY STEWART E. PERRY & DON MCNAIR

*“Practitioners, government delegates & business representatives of all ages & across various backgrounds from around the world; specialists in co-operative development; analysts & researchers; professors; field workers & policy-makers – there was such a strong concentration of wisdom in that single hotel for four days, as well as a tremendous amount of energy. It did a tremendous job to root community economic development in my heart.”*  
(Raïmi B. Osseni, CCEDNet Program Assistant)

As Raïmi Osseni’s remarks indicate, “Building Bridges” was more than just a theme for the events of the 2006 National Conference on CED and the Social Economy. “Building Bridges,” perhaps more than any other idea, characterizes what happened in Vancouver, March 15-18.

Opening the conference Thursday morning Dr. John Helliwell, Professor Emeritus of Economics at the University of British Columbia, presented a clear, statistically-based picture of the importance of building bridges and the components of those structures: trust, engagement, employment, companionship, health, quality of government, and last

of all, income. The results of international research conducted by Helliwell and Robert Putnam demonstrate conclusively that people’s sense of well-being derives foremost from interpersonal trust, engagement with one other, and an ability to influence their governance. These are the primary components of what he and Putnam call “social capital.”

That’s something his listeners have long understood instinctively. For years we have worked in the conviction that people are better off when they work together over long periods to achieve things to which they mutually aspire. But it was reassuring to get confirmation in solid scientific survey work around the world that we have been on the right track, building bridges within our communities and outside them. (Incidentally, Helliwell also reported that an enjoyable job – paid or unpaid – was the third-most important contributor to life satisfaction. No wonder we are all so happy at these occasions!)

Perhaps, as Helliwell mused, the theme song of social capital is that childhood tune, “The More We Get Together the Happier We’ll Be.” Taking his remark to heart, Vicki Austad wrote another, now-always-to-be-expected, joyful theme song for this year’s conference. Sung at the last session, it reprised some of the conference’s key events:

- The announcement that the *Chantier de l’économie sociale* and CCEDNet had signed a memorandum to formalize close collaboration – a bridge built with Quebec’s powerful and paramount social economy network, which is itself a set of bridges.
- Mike Lewis’ suggestion that the staff of all CCEDNet member organizations donate to the network 10 cents per hour that they work by a check-off system. Each donor would then receive an annual receipt to be used for charitable donation/tax purposes. That could garner CCEDNet an amount sufficient to underwrite all its basic expenses and make it independent of government grants.

(left) Conferees relax between sessions in Vancouver, (right) Vancouver’s 80-voice Solidarity Notes Labour Choir perform at the opening gala. Photos: Gilles Gagné.

- Unprecedented diversity among registrants in terms of sector, location, ethnicity, and role in CED and social enterprise. Add that to the fact that CCEDNet members were a minority of those who registered, and it is a sign of just how far our members are reaching out.
- An inspiring pre-conference session hosted by the Canadian Women's CED Council put public policy under scrutiny. This reverberated through the conference, especially in Saturday's session on a renewed and broader "communities agenda."
- And session after session of workshops that documented multisectoral CED collaboration among aboriginals, youth, francophone minorities, new immigrants, and other often disenfranchised groups – as well as collaboration with others to create new resources for community investment.

Perhaps the only lost opportunity to build bridges was the sudden cancellation of a plenary address on behalf of the new Conservative Government by the Minister of Western Economic Diversification, Carol Skelton. The Official Opposition did put in an appearance in the person of John Godfrey, who urged listeners to think through the role that CCEDNet can play in defining and advancing a communities agenda at four levels of government: municipal, aboriginal, provincial/territorial, and national. Returning once more to Helliwell's theme, Godfrey warned that, without citizen engagement, any intergovernmental agreements that emerge in the coming years will lack legitimacy.

In addition to the pre-conference and plenary sessions, the conference offered 52 workshops and 10 cracker barrel presentations. There was a Marketplace and Showcase of Community Initiatives and Social Enterprises and a myriad other formal and informal group meetings. There is no way to do full justice to the richness of such a gathering, but the following highlights may give a sense of what people like Raïmi found to learn and experience.

## Preconference Activities

Probably the most challenging pre-conference event was the policy agenda session of the Canadian Women's CED Council. Leading off with a rousing keynote that brought conferees to their feet, economist and journalist Armine Yalnizyan challenged the Harper government to show the same unswerving commitment to the health and safety of Canadian women and their families as it is prepared to offer Afghans. If "whatever it takes" in time, treasure,



and material applies to Afghanistan, she observed, it certainly should apply to Canada. Unhappily, the last 12 years of Canadian politics have displayed that very propensity to "cut and run" (cut social investment and run from social responsibility) that Harper claims is uncharacteristic of us Canadians.

A second pre-conference event gave a glimpse of the extraordinary boost that information communication technologies (ICT) can bring to community development. Sponsored by the Office of Learning Technologies of Human Resources and Skill Development Canada, this session featured use of ICT beamed in direct from the region of Sioux Lookout in Ontario, and from Port Hardy and Trail in B.C. Practitioners reported how they had made use of sophisticated but robust ICT in the last three years.

There were also two site visits. The B.C. Co-operative Association hosted a tour to several co-operatives active in the heart of Vancouver. An urban food security tour, led by Herb Barbolet (Farmfolk/Cityfolk, Vancouver) introduced conference-goers to the City's Food Charter and featured urban agriculture, community gardens, and socially responsible food-related businesses.

## Annual General Meeting & Action Planning

Wisely, CCEDNet held its AGM at the very beginning of the national conference. Holding it at the end (the usual practice) has tended to downgrade its importance and attendance. Another new feature, due to a resolution last year, was the form of the Treasurer's financial report. It now provides members with more detail than just the auditors' report.

From that report, members confronted the primary dilemma facing CCEDNet in the coming year. Costs are climbing substantially with membership, but some significant revenue sources are now drying up. Essentially, CCEDNet has to figure out how to reconfigure the financial base on which a very intricate structure of research, communications, organizing, and advocacy has taken shape.

Also of special importance was a report from the Board's Governance Committee which had been charged with reviewing CCEDNet membership categories, rules for submission of resolutions, and other topics that would promote democratic member engagement. (For the full minutes of the AGM, readers should consult the CCEDNet website.)

A further result of last year's AGM was the initiation of an action planning session as a concluding feature for national conferences. On this occasion, in addition to a review of suggestions for a broadened policy thrust – a “communities agenda” – all participants engaged in systematic small-group discussions to come up with ideas that they wanted to pursue in the coming year and that they wanted to recommend to all members.

The range of suggestions was broad. It went all the way from an ambitious proposal to lobby for a credible national daycare program (not just a childcare tax credit), over to monitoring the social economy research projects of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council to make sure they were truly relevant to the needs of practitioners.

## The Work Sessions

The conference's Cracker Barrel was the usual hothouse of ideas and initiatives, in which presenters had 20 minutes to introduce and discuss their work before delegates rotated to another table. Longer workshop sessions followed six streams in addition to “building bridges across sectors”: Aboriginal CED, community-based enterprises, policy, youth and CED, community sustainability, and research. But there were many non-stream workshops besides. In the space here, we can give only a hint of the range of topics that grabbed the attention of conference participants.

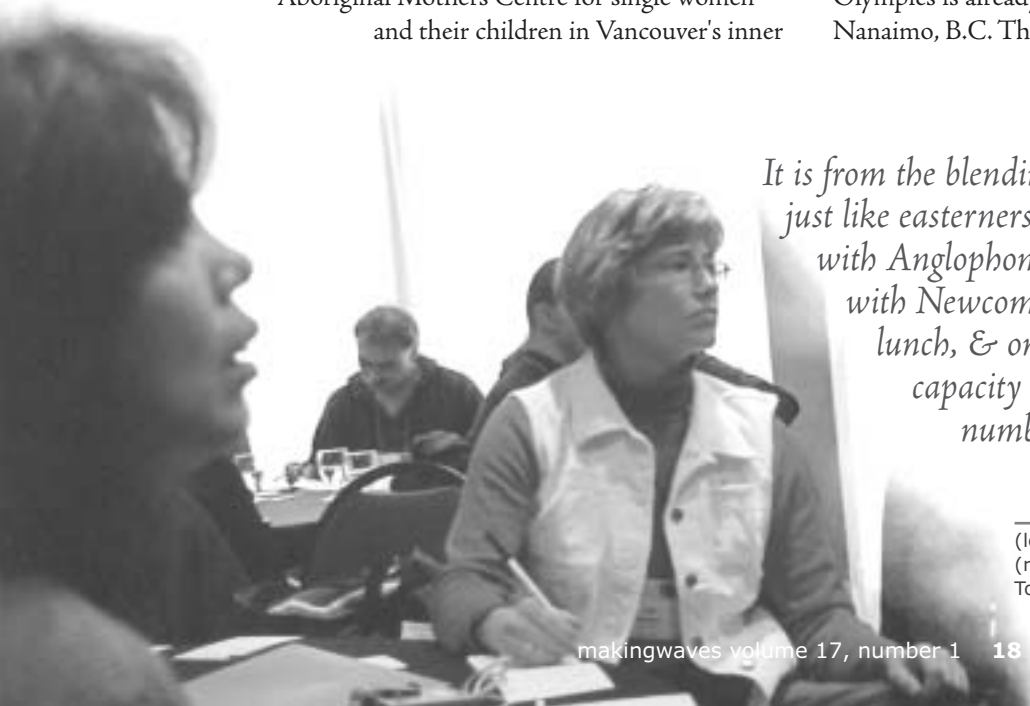
Penny Kerrigan Irons described Vancouver's Aboriginal Mothers Centre for single women and their children in Vancouver's inner

city. The Centre's recent entry to the world of social enterprise was explained by AMCS business manager Danielle Levine. Her exhaustive pre-feasibility study indicated that the Centre's option to purchase an about-to-close knitting factory held real promise. So the Centre bought the factory and has had a booming first year of sales of distinctive woolens. The big issue for the factory now is how to invest more of its revenue stream in staff training and wages and become a vehicle of individual empowerment as well as a money-maker for the Centre.

Successes like those of the Aboriginal Mothers Center were counterpointed by reminders that failure can be a grim but marvelous teacher. Two of downtown Vancouver's social enterprises, the Potluck Café and Cleaning Solutions, led a “post mortem” on Lunch a la Kart, a third enterprise that recently closed. From this examination it appeared that short-term core funding discouraged a steady accumulation of insight, skill, and profit. Admittedly, enthusiasm had also trumped patient consideration at every turn. It became clear that better market research would have revealed basic difficulties in the business concept.

Evaluation of something so complex as CED is always an issue. So it was valuable that an organization like the Community Economic Development Technical Assistance Program (CEDTAP), that has evaluated more than 400 community initiatives in the past nine years, should preside over a discussion of “Results that Matter: Evaluating CED Impacts.” In another session, legal complexities challenged participants when Laird Hunter cheerfully and carefully led them through the labyrinth of charity law to help their organizations make a wise decision about how, or if, to apply for charitable registration.

Major national trends and events can offer special opportunities for marginalized communities. Nicole Langlois led a discussion of the “catalytic effect” that the 2010 Winter Olympics is already having on the francophone community in Nanaimo, B.C. There, with federal, provincial, and municipal



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(left) Vancouver workshop participants. Photo: CCE,  
(right) John Godfrey, MP for Don Valley West,  
Toronto. Photos: Gilles Gagné.





assistance, they are developing initiatives that will make that international event Nanaimo's chance to draw national and international francophone attention to the city's own annual Maple Sugar Festival.

Younger practitioners were much in evidence. Louis Grenier, in a retrospective comment on the conference in its final session, suggested that we are mistaken to consider the youth in CED as our "future." "They are in fact our present, with us today," he observed. Indeed two "emerging leaders" (Victoria Morris and Alex Chernoff) were elected to the CCEDNet Board; they were also key organizers of well-attended workshops.

With 619 registered participants, this was the most heavily attended conference to date. And what a diverse crowd it was! The presence of a record contingent of international participants (from Botswana, Nepal, Niger, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam, among others) evidenced CCEDNet's participation in the international meetings on the Social Solidarity Economy in Dakar last year. It indicates a new international thrust for CCEDNet in the coming year.

Another contingent it was good to see were representatives of CED constituents: marginalized people of many sectors for whose particular benefit CED and social enterprises are supposed to work, and whose own work make those programs run properly. By means of the home videos and the comments of his program participants, Robert Loiselles (JobWORKS, Winnipeg) brought home how that project uses housing renovation to increase the employability of Aboriginal youth. From the same city, participants in Ojijiita Pimatiswin Kinamatwin, an employment program for Aboriginal street gang members with criminal justice records, explained the program's impact more succinctly and effectively than any practitioner could. Ola Nuga, a graduate of Eva's Phoenix (Toronto) testified to how effectively that program uses commercial printing – and seven levels of post-training follow-up – to steer homeless youth into meaningful careers. Finally, during Saturday morning's action planning session,

members of Toronto's Common Ground Co-operative talked about the wages paid to the intellectually disabled members. Nobody else could have said it better.


When you combine these examples with an awareness of how many conferees once were themselves members of marginal populations, there is good reason to feel that this movement is living out a commitment to inclusiveness.

But wait a minute. A goodly number of our most able practitioners and members were not in attendance. What is that about?

There are always good reasons not to attend a conference, of course: family, health, project deadlines, not to mention geography. But especially in this phase of rapid expansion of our organization (particularly due to the growing relationship between CED and social economy practitioners), we have to be wary of a conference menu that allocates plenty of time to introductory workshops, but not enough to intermediate and senior levels of skill. In addition to "101s," we have to be careful to offer "330" and "450" level workshops that engage our more experienced practitioners, so they move heaven and earth to get there. Just getting them there puts them within reach of the AGM, board elections, and the policy discussions, so those events too may have the benefit of their input. And they may have the benefit of a direct, sweaty reminder about how this movement is changing.

Without young blood we're in a fix; but without old blood, we're in another fix. It is from the blending of Old Hands with New Hands, just like easterners with westerners, Francophones with Anglophones, rural with urban, and Aboriginal with Newcomer – in workshops, plenaries, over lunch, and on the dance floor – that we derive a capacity and clout far beyond what our numbers would suggest.

That blending and bridge building is indeed the salient theme of community economic development and social economy. It is what makes CCEDNet probably one of the most creative, boisterous, and *important* organizations to which one could hope to belong. May the planners for the 2007 National Conference in St. John's, Newfoundland try still harder to make that blending of practice happen in terms of experience and expertise, as well as sector, language, geography, and gender.

In her summation for the final session, Natasha Jackson (Black Community Workgroup of Halifax Cooperative) used the felicitous phrase, "co-producing change." In a session the day before, involving many of the international participants, people spoke of "a new kind of citizenship, responsible and caring." Surely, conferees left Vancouver inspired for a new year of concentrated effort with and on behalf of the marginalized everywhere. 

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