

Researching the Social Economy

by Laurie Mook, Jack Quarter and Sherida Ryan

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Reviewed by Luc Thériault

Researching the Social Economy presents an interesting collection of more than a dozen original essays on how the social economy and its important cluster of organisations contribute to Canadian society.

The first chapter, *What's in a Name?*, is very readable and gets around the never ending technical debate about the perfect definition of the *social economy* by looking at it instead in a threefold way (social movement, alternative businesses, and conceptual framework). The chapter provides some key points on the recent history of the term in the Canadian context. It also situates some of the contributions made in other chapters within a useful Venn diagram.

The second chapter, *A Portrait of the Ontario Social Economy*, provides a first unified portrait of the Ontario social economy by combining information on non-profits and co-operatives. This is done using data from different large surveys. This remains a highly descriptive chapter that offers a lot of good data and represents an enormous amount of work. It reads, however, as a rather cautious statistical report. Nevertheless an excellent point is made, near the end of the chapter, inviting governments not simply to refer to social economy organisations as 'partners' but to actually treat these organisations as such! Compared to Quebec, the Ontario social economy still suffers from an underdevelopment of public policy to support its initiatives.

The third chapter, *The Social Economy in Quebec*, provides a valuable and accessible introduction to the social economy for the non-Quebecois readers. A weakness of this chapter is that not enough emphasis is placed on the role of feminist groups in the socio-political emergence of the social economy in Quebec, while the role of the union movement in general is perhaps a little over-emphasised. There is also a failed opportunity to use the brief discussion on the childcare centres to talk about the role of the social economy in the co-construction of services.

The fourth chapter, *The Social Economy in Europe*, is authored by Roger Spear and offers a structural description of the European social

economy. It also provides a good historical introduction to the subject. We find here relevant discussions regarding definition and legal status (the EU has formally recognised the social economy) and some sound criticisms of the approach championed by the Johns Hopkins University in the study of the third sector. The comment regarding the pressures towards isomorphism and its consequences on the distinctiveness of the social economy is very insightful and a number of challenges are identified in the conclusion.

The fifth chapter, *A Comparative Analysis of Voluntary Sector/Government Relations in Canada and England*, looks at these relations in both countries between 1994 and 2008. It does this by using 'historical institutionalism' as a framework for the analysis. This is an excellent chapter, but what is missing for Canada is a better articulation of the federalist dimension. One cannot understand the successes or failures in voluntary sector/government relations in Canada without stressing that provincial governments are in many cases greater funders of the voluntary sector than the federal government is. The chapter suffers on occasion by confusing 'Canada' with the 'Federal Order of Government'. It is at the Federal Level that the voluntary sector has remained disconnected from the policy process, not in Canada.

The sixth chapter, *The Ontario Government Relationship with the Social Economy Sector*, follows nicely on the previous one by using a continuum approach to analyse the relationship of the Ontario government with the social economy. This approach is somewhat reminiscent of what J M Coston (*NVSQ*, 17[3], 358-382) proposed a few years ago at the international level. The author is correct in concluding that: "the social economy sector is being under-utilised in the development and delivery of policy to Ontarians". (p148)

The seventh chapter, *The Social Economy in Economics and Business Textbooks*, points to the fact that little attention is paid to the social economy in business textbooks. Not only is it rarely represented (co-operatives do not appear

to be business organisations), but it is often done in a negative light. This is a problem as business programme graduates might not be adequately prepared to work in a co-operative environment, for instance.

Chapter eight, *Mandatory High School Community Service in Ontario*, tries to assess these programmes in relation to the social economy via three studies. This reads a little like an organisational behaviour psychological paper. The aims and the methodology of the three studies are clearly presented. Some policy implications are discussed in a balanced manner. One important recommendation is for a better structured programme that results in 'suitable' placements.

Chapter nine, *Strategic Partnerships*, tackles both the issues of partnership and climate change in relation to the social economy. It offers an Ontario case study of organisational changes and resilience and provides some good links to the literature on partnership. It discusses how environmental organisations can create strategic partnerships with the private sector in response to cuts in government funding.

Chapter ten, *The Online Social Economy*, brings to the fore a new and original topic in the study of the social economy in Canada. This mapping exercise is nicely written with a good flow and a beautiful style. It is a great introduction for those who pay little attention to research about the internet. While this is still just an exploration it is very informative, notably with the inclusion of a small number of interesting case-studies. The results show that advocacy social economy organisations can be successful at using the internet to fulfil their mission. On the down side, we realise that the social economy label is no better known in cyberspace than it is in the real world. This study is a very promising initial step for this type of research.

Chapter eleven, *Corporate Participation in the Social Economy*, ventures into the realm of corporates in the social area of economic life through Employer-Supported Volunteering (ESV) programmes. Some, like Robert Reich (2007, *Supercapitalism*), would associate these programmes with nothing more than PR or another corporate advertising strategy. But, as the author argues, the motivation might not matter if we are to study the impacts or the contribution of these ESV programmes on the social economy. Yet, more could be said on the potential for these ESV programmes to support mainly 'nice and clean' non-profits organisations.

This bias towards 'legitimate, deserving charity' should receive more attention in the analysis. As pointed out by the authors, directions for future research in this field could involve integrating the perspective of leaders of social economy organisations in an evaluation of the contribution of ESV programmes towards the public good.

Chapter twelve is focused on work stoppages in the social economy. In a clear style the author explains that human resources management in this sector is challenging (due, for instance, to things like increased accountability requirements and low levels of compensation). As a result, work stoppages are not as rare as one could expect. The analysis explores a series of questions using a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. This chapter provides some good insight into the issue studied and makes strong linkages to the literature.

Chapter thirteen digs into organic farming, the many challenges these farmers are facing, and how they can use the social economy to address these challenges. One of the key roles of social economy organisations here has been in promoting solidarity and breaking the perceived feeling of isolation on the part of the organic farmers. One of the core challenges is the constant tension between mainstream marketing demands (such as for packaging) and the respect of environmental principles. Rural community development is also being impacted by the contribution of the social economy in terms of environmental protection. So, all in all, the participation of these farmers acts as a sort of leverage in community development efforts. Yet, globalisation (and thus export-orientation) remains a major challenge that organic agriculture will have to contend with.

Chapter fourteen immerses us in the challenges faced by minority francophone immigrants in Ontario and how the co-operative model might offer them some help. These immigrants are in a double-minority situation by being francophone and from non-European descent. While the co-operative model could be used to help them, the current co-operative leadership in Ontario's French-speaking communities is disconnected from the reality of the recent immigrants and unable to step to the plate. The authors hope, in the end, that a focus on the inclusive values of the co-operative model will provide directions for the integration of minority French-speaking immigrants in Ontario.

In the conclusion, the editors remind us that one of the best strategies to research

the social economy is to highlight the many ways that its organisations interact with other sectors. By mapping many of these interactions, *Researching the Social Economy* has certainly contributed to our understanding of the roles played by the social economy in the Canadian society and of the influence the social economy sector can have on the state and the market.

This book aims at offering a solid and rich collection of essays on the social economy in Canada. It does exactly that. It is general enough to be read by almost any educated person and thus is addressed at a wide audience. Jargon

is very limited. Yet, the depth of the analysis is more than sufficient to sustain the interest of the experts. One of the book's main limitations is probably the lack of a good chapter focusing on women and the social economy. In spite of some of its shortcomings, this book makes a great and much awaited contribution to the scholarship on the social economy. It provides solid analysis while avoiding excessive technical debates, and certainly advances current gaps within the field.

The Reviewer

Luc Thériault holds a PhD in sociology from the University of Toronto. He specialises in social policy and third-sector studies and on the interactions between governments and social economy organisations involved in the delivery of human services. He has done survey research on non-profit organisations and co-operatives in Canada.