

A BIG THINK

issues facing your organization

January 11, 2005

The Social Economy

Discussion about “the Social Economy” has increased in English Canada because of Paul Martin’s 2004 Budget Speech. The speech offered a brief definition of the social economy and set a program in place to support its development. While this is new language for many Canadians, activists in Europe, the UK, Australia and Quebec have been using the term for over a decade. Tim Beachy shares his thoughts.

“The Social Economy” discussion invites UCSCo-op members to step back and reflect on our work. We are clearly important players in the social economy (see sidebar definition). The question is: How can we be better at what we do?

Like any living system, the social economy is more a dynamic unfolding process than a Thing. What direction and priorities emerge when we see our work from the social economy perspective? It’s helpful to look back:

The Community Context

Canadians have built a social safety net over decades of hard work – to provide programs, initiatives and infrastructures that support individuals and communities. Often the support programs got overlaid on existing community infrastructures, effectively replacing the local social economy and breaking down pre-existing social capital. Over time, power has tended to migrate to external sources of funding and accountability.

A New Political Will

There is a need to re-invest in and re-build local social economies. We need to support community-based infrastructure and sources of common wealth; to build through and beyond the resources and infrastructure provided by governmental structures; to integrate common political will with community based accountability. More specifically, we need to:

- See the community as an asset-filled network of social economic activity (working with people, not for them)
- Network and work synergistically outside our normal spheres of activity/influence (breaking out of silos!)
- Get proactive with government policy makers to unleash the huge potential of self-organizing communities to meet their own needs (uniting to influence policy.)

I believe the social economy discussion provides a potent base for re-thinking and re-visioning our work – and for creating the future in new and exciting ways. I would love to hear your opinions. Let us have a discussion!

“The **social economy** is an ensemble of activities and organizations that share five principles and structural elements. Social economy enterprises:

- Serve/support members and the community instead of focusing on profits.
- Are neither private businesses nor public agencies.
- Focus on participation and democratic decision-making.
- Give priority to people and work when distributing revenues and surpluses.
- Are based on principles of participation, empowerment, and individual and collective responsibility.”

Nancy Neamtan, Chantier de l’économie sociale (Quebec)

For more on the Social Economy, see CEE’s [Making Waves \(April 2004\)](#) and [Mendell \(Oct 2003\)](#)

The Co-op is involved:

- Helping members create empowering participatory structures: e.g. social co-ops
- Pioneering new equity and investment tools for social enterprise
- Developing initiatives through the BC Social Economy Roundtable