

## **Summary of Proposal**

### **1. Summary of research**

This proposal starts from the premise that current responses to the challenges facing the Atlantic region build on a long established tradition of innovation and mutual self-help. The wide variety of existing social economy undertakings are vital for the region's social and economic development. Our partnership proposes to develop a better understanding of this complex and diverse sector (both mapping its elements and conceptualizing its forms), to empower social economy actors by researching the conditions under which the various components flourish or are stymied (including the analysis of social and economic context, policy and regulatory frameworks), and to contribute to the bridging, bonding and other aspects of capacity building and inclusion that will strengthen and mobilize Atlantic Canada's social economy. The social economy takes many forms. It is particularly rich within rural and small community settings, where it helps to express the Region's First Nations identities and the richness inherent in our varied linguistic and ethnic ancestries. Diversity in the social economy is also expressed in fragmentation and inadequate knowledge of community development efforts in different geographic, cultural, and linguistic sectors. Other divisions relate to various actors' relationships to the market and to the public sector. Such unbridged silos weaken transference of knowledge, limiting the adoption of innovations and the awareness of options. A further social economy distinction of importance for both academics and activists concerns core values and assumptions underlying various efforts. What is the relative mix of individualistic and collectivistic/solidaristic values? Is the social economy best understood as residual, serving to fill in where governments and markets are not meeting needs, or does it foreshadow the development of an alternative economy characterized by empowerment, inclusiveness, and sustainability?

The proposed research network links university-based researchers with social economy community partners (e.g. non-profits, self-identified community economic development organizations, and co-operatives), both federations and grass roots community groups. In building a team premised on active partnership we draw on participatory action research methodologies. Partners and researchers identify research questions, develop research designs and methodologies, and target a range of priority outcomes. Our questions address four main dimensions: 1) conceptualizing and describing the social economy in Atlantic Canada, 2) policy inventory and analysis, 3) social economy mobilization around common needs and issues of inclusion and exclusion contributing to social capacity across the region, 4) modeling and researching innovative combinations of traditional and IT-based communication and dissemination processes and strategies within the social economy and academia.

The project will contribute significantly to the advancement of knowledge and to wider social benefits. The research areas are central to understanding the social economy of the region, and will contribute to national and international understandings. Both theory and practice will benefit from mapping the landscape of social economy organizations in Atlantic Canada, understanding how and when they develop, learning how various social economy organizations see themselves, what they accomplish or do not accomplish and why, the nature of the silos and the conditions under which they diverge or work effectively together to address common needs. The use of a social

economy frame, necessarily adopted by partners in the project, will itself have an impact on the partners. Social economy actors and policy makers will benefit from the analysis of the policy/regulatory environment and suggestions for change, and from the experience of researching, theorizing, and modeling policies and practices of inclusion and empowerment. The student research assistantships contribute to research capacity in the social economy. Applied material such as social economy curriculum and toolkits build capacities and understandings.