Project # 1.1 Survey of Co-ops and Credit Unions in Atlantic Canada

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Persons Responsible:

L. Thériault, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, NB
L. Brown, Mount Saint Vincent University, Halifax, NS
R. Skibbens, Service Nova Scotia and Municipal Relations, Halifax, NS

Contact: luct@unb.ca

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Project Description:

As part of its large research program, the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network decided in 2006 to prepare and conduct a survey of co-operatives and credit unions in all four provinces of Atlantic Canada. It was the felt that coherent and up-to-date information on the co-operative sector in the region was lacking and that such a project would make a significant and timely contribution to the “mapping” or “profiling” of the social economy.

Dr. Luc Thériault from the University of New Brunswick took the lead of this project with the help of other member of the research network and the technical assistance of survey research consultants from York University in Toronto. The survey was administered between April and October 2007 and yielded 296 usable responses from co-operatives and credit unions from across the region. This preliminary research report offers a first look at the information obtained by analyzing it overall and by breaking it down by language, provincial, and type of co-operatives. Other analyses on the data are possible, of course, and may be the subject of future publications.

Overall, 80% of organizations responded to the English version of our questionnaire and 20% responded to the French version. Financial co-operatives (credit unions and caisses populaires) account for about 21% percent of responding organizations, housing co-operatives account for about 13%, and the remaining 66% is composed of a wide variety of “other co-operatives”.

For all the responding co-operatives the average “age-in-business” is nearly 33 years. Generally, co-operatives are members of one or two federations or associations. The Nova Scotia Co-op Council and Co-op Atlantic in particular are
among the dominant umbrella organizations for the sector in the region. Co-operatives in Atlantic Canada, in turn, have cumulatively well over half a million “members” but it must be remembered that some of these members are counted more than once as an individual can be a member in several co-operatives. Financial co-operatives tend to have the largest number of individual members.

Co-operatives in Atlantic Canada generally hold one AGM per year, plus at least one other meeting. The typical Board of Directors overseeing these organizations is composed of nine or seven members. The Board of Directors typically meets 10 times a year (modal value). In about 24% of co-operatives, Board Members receive some form of compensation for their participation on the board. The use of volunteers (aside from board members) is found in about 55% of responding organizations.

The financial picture of the co-operatives in Atlantic Canada is extremely diversified and thus difficult to summarize. Using the median values, we find that a “typical” co-operative in the region has revenues of about $437,000 and expenditures of around $343,000. But these figures are only aggregates and the ranges found for both revenues and expenditures are astounding. The number of paid employees (defined here as those receiving T4 slips for income tax purposes) also varies widely between co-operatives as the mode is 0, the median value is 3, and the average is 23.6! More interestingly, we can say that the cumulative number of employees (part-time and full-time) employed by the co-operatives responding to this survey is totaling over 6,800. This is not an insignificant number of jobs in the region!

Roughly between 40% and 60% of co-operatives are found to make voluntary contributions (the proportion varies with the type of contribution) to their local community. Collaborations with other co-operative (i.e., within the co-op sector) is perhaps not as extensive as we had expected (22% of co-operatives report doing “a lot” of it and 26% report none of it) and the potential barriers preventing collaborations remain to be explored. As for the organization’s internal capacity (for things like planning, administration and IT), it is among financial co-operatives that we find the greater amount of capacities.

The survey shows that the internationally acknowledged Co-operative Principles are relatively well known in the sector (two thirds of co-operatives say that they are aware or very aware of them) but the education of the public (as opposed to that of members) is probably one of the areas (with participation in public policy development) where responding organizations are the least likely to fully live by these principles.

Finally, reporting practices of organizations are now extending relatively frequently into the reporting of social impacts (39%) but still relatively rarely into the reporting of environmental impacts (18%).

The conclusion stresses the importance for governments to pay increasing attention to the activities of co-operatives and to institute policies and regulations that are adapted to and helpful for the co-operative sector in the region.
**Outputs:**

*Research Reports:*

**A Portrait of Co-operatives and Credit Unions in Atlantic Canada: Preliminary Analysis**

**Portrait des coopératives et caisses d’épargne et de crédit au Canada atlantique: Sommaire**

**Portrait des coopératives et des caisses d’épargne et de crédit dans les provinces de l’Atlantique: Analyse préliminaire**

*Conference Presentations:*

**CASC 2008:** *Abstract* "A New Portrait of Co-operatives and Credit Unions in Atlantic Canada"  
L. Thériault

**ISTR 2008:** *Abstract* "Co-operatives and Credit Unions in Atlantic Canada: The State of the Art"  
L. Thériault

**Co-operative Values Conference 2009**  
The State of Co-operatives and Credit Unions in Atlantic Canada  
July 1-2  
Manchester, UK.  
Luc Theriault, Ron Skibbens and Leslie Brown

**Co-op Week Oct. 2008**  
Hlfx and St. John's

**Co-operative College July 2009**  
Manchester, UK

**Provincial Maps as of June 2008:**

A. Language and Type – **NB, NL, NS, PEI**  
B. Density of Respondents – **NB, NL, NS, PEI**  
C. Proportion and Type – **NB, NL, NS, PEI**  
D. Employment Density – **NB, NL, NS, PEI**  
E. Revenues of Organizations – **NB, NL, NS, PEI**

*Other:*

Directory of co-operatives and credit unions in Atlantic Canada