

Bridging Public Investment and Social Value: An examination of the supports for the social economy on Prince Edward Island

Project number: 2.6

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Introduction

The intent of this project was to map the level of federal and provincial government funding and policy supports that exist for social economy organizations on Prince Edward Island and to inquire into the impact of any changes in this public investment.

Research Questions:

- What federal and provincial funding programs exist to support social economy organizations on Prince Edward Island, and especially for those involved in the empowerment and inclusion of marginalized members of society?
- What changes have occurred in the level of federal and provincial supports and what have been the effects of these changes on Prince Edward Island's social economy?
- How can social economy policy and funding practices be improved?



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Background and Rationale

This project was conceived in response to federal funding and policy changes that affected Prince Edward Island's social organizations.

The study verified that public funding and policy supports have a direct impact of how social organizations deliver services and that adequate support is vital to the sustainability of the sector. It also provided recommendations on how communities, government funders and social organizations can work together toward a healthy and vibrant social economy.

This study is a contribution to the wider body of research on funding practices on Atlantic Canada, and provides a description of what is happening in the Prince Edward Island context, a social economy characterized by small organizations and tightly knit communities.



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Community/University Collaboration (partnership)

Process of building research partnership

- The project was conceived and designed in service of its community partners, providing an opportunity for social organizations to anonymously share their experiences without fear of retribution from their funders.
- Research participants were solicited through the Sub-node's network of social economy organizations.

Partnership contribution to project and anticipated outcomes for partners

- Partners contributed to the design and implementation of the study, and were given the opportunity to participate in the study.
- This study raised awareness of the experiences social organizations have with public support and investment, and provided an opportunity for its partners to begin to mobilize this knowledge in a workshop setting.

Knowledge mobilization within and beyond the partnership

- The research findings were disseminated through media coverage, distribution of the report and public presentations of the findings.
- A learning event was held in Charlottetown in November 2007, in which members of the social economy, academics and public policy makers discussed the study's recommendations and potential areas for action.
- Select findings from this study were presented in a roundtable discussion on social accounting at the inaugural conference of the Association of Nonprofit and Social Economy Research (ANSER).



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Project Methodology

Between June and September 2007, representatives of thirty social organizations on Prince Edward Island participated in a series of semi-structured interviews that inquired into the funding and policy relationship with the provincial and/or federal governments.

The research report was presented at a learning event in Charlottetown on November 27, 2007, during which the attendees collaborated on possible ways to mobilize the recommendations. The report was meant to be a starting point for action.



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Main Findings To Date

Prince Edward Island's social economy is situated within a funding and policy environment that is often volatile and insufficient.

- Level of public investment are characterized by: unstable and inadequate funding; changing government priorities; bureaucratic inefficiencies; dysfunctional communication processes; a cost-cutting culture; and jurisdictional issues between the provincial and federal governments.
- The impacts of insufficient public investment for social organizations include: financial instability; an inability to plan for the long-term; a lack of organizational sustainability; reduced services; and unrealistic expectations of staff and volunteers, particularly in terms of the administrative burden associated with public funding practices.
- Social organizations have responded, with limited success, through advocacy, network building, raising public awareness, and capitalizing on individual resourcefulness.
- There is an increasing level of resignation as most organizations feel that they have very little influence in the public policy process, particularly at the federal level. This lack of access to decision-making processes is systemic and longstanding.



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Deliverables

The products of this study include:

- Sub-node 2 Learning Event - November 2007
- Research Report – initially presented at the learning event, and then the results of the workshop were included in the final report, launched in April 2008
- Roundtable presentation at the ANSER conference – June 2008
- Meeting with Prince Edward Island provincial government - *pending*



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How the Student Benefited from the Project

The student gained experience in:

- Study design
- Ethics applications
- Conducting research
- Data analysis
- Report writing
- Development and delivery of presentations and workshops.



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Conclusions/Next Steps

The study produced several recommendations on how to improve the funding and policy environment for Prince Edward Island's social economy organizations:

- *Refocus funding criteria and public policy on the needs of the people that the social economy serves.*
- *Develop funding programs that are stable and reflective of the nature of the services they support.*
- *Streamline communication processes and develop institutional infrastructure that is consistent and flexible enough to meet citizens' needs.*
- *Ensure accountability on the part of all stakeholders involved in the provision of social programs. This includes the government.*
- *Use our islandness to enhance the social economy, through effective networks and our strong sense of community.*
- *Develop solutions to the problems identified in this study through partnerships and the collaborative efforts of social organizations, governments and communities.*
- *Most importantly, recognize the true value of the social economy and realize that social policy can only be truly informed when those who are most affected have an ongoing role in policy development.*

The researchers plan to present the study to Prince Edward Island's Executive Council.

The findings of this study have led to further research in the Sub-node 2's current project, "Examining the risk of lost knowledge with personnel changes in small nonprofit organizations on Prince Edward Island."



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