



Centre for the Study of Co-operatives

Aboriginal Co-operatives in Canada

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August, 2005



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- interdisciplinary teaching and research institution
- sector, government and university funded
- teaching, research, extension activity, and publications on co-operative organizations
- currently working on a study of co-operative membership and social cohesion, the largest research project on co-operatives undertaken in Canada
- co-op development projects in China and Mongolia



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Co-operatives in Canada

- Over 10,000 co-operatives
- More than 15 million memberships
- Combined assets of \$160 Billion
- Operating in all sectors and regions
- In communities large and small



Aboriginal Co-operatives in Canada

- Approximately 133 co-ops
- Largest number are in the northern regions of the Arctic, mostly among Inuit
- Serving a wide variety of needs
 - provide food and supplies, post offices, cable television and internet, hotels, adventure tourism
 - Marketing of arts and crafts, wild rice, fish products
 - Housing
 - Financial services

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Aboriginal Co-operatives in Canada (2002 stats / 77 reporting co-ops)

- 26,000 memberships
- \$343 Million in sales
- \$277 Million in assets
- \$130 Million in member equity
- 1,560 employees

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Arctic Co-operatives Ltd. and Fédération des coopératives du Nouveau Québec

- Two of largest co-op federations—both would make top 500 publicly traded Canadian companies
- serve 50,000 in 48 communities
- employ 1200 Aboriginal people
- have assets of a quarter of a billion dollars
- earn an annual \$26 million spent in the community
- return \$7 million annually to members

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The Suitability of the Co-op Model

- Does the co-operative model fit Aboriginal and First Nations ambitions and needs?

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“Our traditional way of life was often the basis of starting our co-operatives. Arts and craft production, fur harvesting and commercial fisheries are examples of the traditional activities that were the basis of the early co-operatives.”

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The Suitability of the Co-op Model

- The co-op model conforms with the priorities identified by the *Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples...*
- It makes room “so that Aboriginal people can develop their own solutions”
 - It respects “the collectivity in Aboriginal society”

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The Suitability of the Co-op Model

- It recognizes that *“the economic development of any community is a process”*
- It locates *“authority and resources to support economic development in the hands of appropriate Aboriginal institutions at the level of the nation and community”*

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Key Innovations in Aboriginal Co-ops

- Use of the Multi-Purpose Co-op Model: Meeting a wide range of community needs and opportunities in remote regions
- Financing: Aboriginal co-operatives have used innovative alternatives to overcome financing barriers

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Aboriginal Co-operatives... Impact on Community

- Building / Strengthening Physical Infrastructure
 - Co-operatives stabilize and contribute to growth in communities.
 - They provide a vehicle to allow people to see the repercussions of their individual actions on the community.

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Aboriginal Co-operatives... Impact on Community

- Building / Strengthening Personal Infrastructure
 - Co-operatives have contributed significantly to the development of leaders in Aboriginal communities.

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Aboriginal Co-operatives... Impact on Community

- Building / Strengthening Social Infrastructure
 - Co-operatives promote local pride and social integration, local control and local reinvestment.

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Aboriginal Co-operatives Today

- The economic impact of co-operatives on communities is substantial, especially in remote centers, where they ensure competitive prices and supply a wide range of services.

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Aboriginal Co-operatives Today

Co-ops behave differently from other institutions in terms of

- commitment to community
- empowering individuals
- retaining leadership in the community
- keeping a greater portion of the value generated within the local economy in the community

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The Potential for Growth

• Encouraging Co-operative Development

- Demonstrated ability to provide consumer services and build infrastructure
- Great potential in development of housing, financial institutions, etc.

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Potential for Growth

- Social Care: Health, Child and Family Services
- Resource Industries – fisheries, forestry
- Meeting service needs of small communities
- Community Development

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Challenges to Growth

Awareness and Understanding of the Co-op Model

- In Government organizations
- In Aboriginal Development organizations
- In Aboriginal communities

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Challenges to Growth

Increased Understanding of Aboriginal Co-operatives

- The Northern co-op experience in Inuit and Dene Communities needs to be more completely examined
- Information needs to be compiled in accessible forms and communicated to Aboriginal peoples, preferably by Inuit and Dene leaders

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Challenges to Growth

Access to Programs and Funding

- Stronger connection / collaboration needed between co-ops and Aboriginal CED organizations

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Challenges to Growth

Governance, Community Support and Participation

- Need closer examination of how co-ops “fit into” the social, economic and political structure of Aboriginal communities
- Co-operatives are viewed by many as the middle option between band-run business and private enterprise

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Role of External Agents

- Initial Founding: Co-operatives emerge in part because of dedicated and informed leadership, and an education process
- Funding: Emerging Co-operatives have a need for secure funding sources
- Managerial Expertise and Training: Importance of federated structures

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Ongoing Research

- Kugaaruk, NU
- Pond Inlet, NU
- Great Bear, NWT
- Saskatchewan
 - SFNWC - community co-ops
 - FNACS - agriculture co-ops

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For more information

- <http://coop-studies.usask.ca/>

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