

The co-op difference focus of \$1 million research grant

By donalee Moulton

Canada's co-op sector has received an important infusion of cash – to measure its own success. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council has awarded \$1 million to the Canadian Co-operative Association and four academic partners across the country to conduct research on the social, economic and environmental impact of co-operatives.

"We wanted a project that would look at the co-op difference and the value added that co-operatives give. We felt we had not done enough in a social science sense to measure this difference," says John Anderson, CCA's director of government affairs and public policy and the lead co-op sector researcher on the project.

"While the types of research we propose to do are not new, the scope of it is different from that conducted elsewhere," notes Dr. Sonja Novkovic, professor of economics at Saint Mary's University in Halifax and the lead academic researcher for the project.

Measure impact

"This is a push across Canada to measure the impact of cooperatives in a number of ways," she adds. "We will include studies of the impact of credit unions on community wealth; housing co-operatives on household welfare; developing measures of co-operatives' impact on the environment and social well-being; and investigating conditions for co-op success."

The five-year grant, awarded under the Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) program, will also involve researchers from the University of Saskatchewan, the University of Victoria, and Mount Saint Vincent University, all of which are well-known for their research on co-operatives and the social economy. As part of the grant, measurement tools will be developed and topics such as the nature of the cooperative difference as it relates

to social responsibility and accountability will be explored.

Not well understood

"Members of the co-operative sector know that these enterprises have far-reaching impacts for their members and communities they serve, yet the true value of co-operative enterprise is not well understood," notes Anderson. "The research that will be conducted through the CURA aims to examine the full impact of co-operatives on Canada's social, economic and environmental fabric, and demonstrate their value to Canadian communities."

"From the co-operative movement's perspective," he adds, "these are important questions. We need proof of what we know intuitively about the co-op movement."

It's not only co-ops here that will benefit as a result. "The benefits of this research will be significant," adds Novkovic, "both for Canada's cooperative sector, and internationally."

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will be significant.

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