

Summary of Proposed Research

The Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) and a group of universities that study co-operatives are proposing a unique partnership to measure the **social, economic and environmental impact of co-operatives** within Canadian society, and identify the value added by co-operatives to Canada's communities. This research will build upon the networks, reach and partnerships of CCA, whose members represent some 9 million co-operative members across Canada, and the research already undertaken by the co-operative centres for study at the universities of Saskatchewan, Victoria and St. Mary's (in collaboration with Mount Saint Vincent University).

Canada has close to 9,000 co-operatives operating in all sectors of the economy in all regions of the country, and together they provide goods and services to more than 17 million members. Guided by the principle of mutual self-help, each of these co-operatives emerged in response to the common social or economic needs of their members, where other solutions were unavailable or unaffordable. Today these co-operatives provide housing, child care, farm supplies and services, groceries, financial services, health care, utility and internet services, and all forms of employment through worker-owned co-operatives. Owned and democratically controlled by their members, these enterprises are guided by a common set of values and principles that govern nearly one million co-operatives worldwide.

Despite their success in dealing with numerous social and economic problems, the true value of co-operatives is not well understood, and this limits the potential to use the co-operative model of enterprise for the full benefit of Canada's communities. Members of the co-operative sector know that these enterprises have far-reaching impacts for the members and communities they serve, and governments, public policymakers and the public will have a better knowledge and understanding of the co-operative model. Yet, without adequate tools to measure their performance and realize their full potential, co-operatives can have difficulty articulating their value to policy makers and the mainstream development sector. This in turn limits the potential and purpose that the co-operative form of enterprise was intended to serve – offering a proven means for ordinary citizens to solve social and economic problems through locally owned and democratically controlled enterprises, while fostering community leadership and wealth.

The partners in this research alliance believe that in these uncertain economic times, Canada must tap into its full wealth of knowledge and insight and examine all viable solutions to the challenges that confront our people and communities. To this end, their research aims to examine the full impact of co-operatives on Canada's social, economic and environmental fabric, and demonstrate their value in Canadian communities, while guiding co-operatives themselves in better understanding and improving their impact in these areas. The research team will achieve this through a network of national and regional research clusters that will develop measurement tools and study topics such as: the nature of the 'co-operative difference' as it relates to social responsibility and accountability; the impact of member and employee participation on a co-operative's performance; the role of credit unions in building community wealth; the impact of housing co-operatives on household income, skills and social capital; and the overall performance and impact of co-operatives from an economic, social and environmental point of view. Additional topics will examine infrastructure support for co-operative development, how to replicate co-operative innovation, and co-operative responses to market failures.

This research is intended to serve the people and communities of Canada. Therefore, all materials resulting from the project will be shared widely through a variety of means – including a website, online conferences, booklets and brochures, presentations and community forums.