



BALTA WORKING PAPER SERIES

**BUILDING A SOCIAL ECONOMY
RESEARCH PLATFORM:**

**TOWARDS A STRATEGIC DECISION-MAKING
APPROACH WITHIN THE BC-ALBERTA SOCIAL
ECONOMY RESEARCH ALLIANCE (BALTA)**

by

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BC-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance

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BUILDING A SOCIAL ECONOMY RESEARCH PLATFORM: Towards a Strategic Decision-Making Approach Within the BC-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance (BALTA)

Background

The roots of the BALTA Research Alliance are anchored in a 30-year history of remarkable people and organisations constructing socio-economic alternatives where failures in the market and public policy have depleted community assets. Innovation, born of necessity and driven by community leadership, has resulted in some remarkable improvements in socio-economic conditions from Sydney, Nova Scotia to aboriginal communities to struggling urban neighbourhoods across the country.

This body of experience became the subject of a spike in research interest and writing in the early 1990s, sponsored in part by National Welfare grants. Some of this work was summarised in the results of a national symposium published in 1994, as well as in a book called *Re-inventing the Local Economy*¹. During this time, the idea of a national network advanced and, after many years of work, resulted in the Canadian CED Network (CEDNet). Today, CEDNet comprises several hundred members and thousands of associated organisations. Concurrent work in Quebec evolved to another level with the formation of the Chantier de l'économie sociale. These two vital networks forged an alliance that in 2004 yielded the social economy initiative of the federal government, a \$15 million dollar research fund supporting social economy research. BALTA is part of this larger research picture.

Many of the partners and collaborators within the BALTA alliance have been actors throughout this process. They are committed to leveraging BALTA research to further strengthen community economic development (CED) and the Social Economy (SE) in BC, Alberta, and across the country. At the October 2006 BALTA Forum, the researchers and advisors restated their strong desire for BALTA to work towards concrete and coherent results. This includes seeking to maximise national collaboration through co-operation with other regional nodes and the National Social Economy Hub.

Constructing Strategic Criteria to Guide BALTA Decision Making

BALTA has limited resources. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) invested in our proposal on the basis of our stated goals and research questions. While respecting the academic freedom of researchers, this paper elaborates those goals and criteria, and develops a framework for setting research priorities and the selection of research projects. In addition the paper suggests including consideration of major societal trends and policy impacts within the decision-making criteria. Simply put, the objective is to allocate limited resources to research priorities and projects relevant to the central goal of the BALTA Social Economy Research Alliance.

BALTA's Central Goal

The central goal of the BALTA is **to strengthen the foundations of the social economy in BC and Alberta**. Obviously, this is not a neutral point of departure.

Re-embedding social goals and social relations into the heart of economic decision-making runs counter to the paradigm of economic decision-making and policy formation that has dominated the last 40 years. Neo-liberal theorists and policymakers have powerfully argued for “free markets” to reign, and to reduce government's role in the economy. They view the pursuit of self-interest through an unrestricted marketplace and free-wheeling movement of capital as the best route to realising the public good.

To some extent, the contemporary social economy and CED movements arose as a counterpoint to this ideology, insisting that social goals must be embraced as part of economic decision-making and development. However, this in no way implies a rejection of the importance of markets. Rather, by definition,ⁱⁱ the social economy engages in the marketplace as a means to advance social goals and strengthen positive social relations. Moreover, social relations are seen as critically important to the healthy functioning of our economic life. Through the 1980s and '90s, one seldom came across traditional neo-liberal activists who accepted, understood, or even welcomed such suggestions.

Today, neo-liberalism is being widely questioned, even discredited and rejected in some quarters. This is not confined to the traditional critics on the left; it includes a growing number of people in the broader population as well as “respectable” intellectuals and practising economists.

In this context, discourse relevant to CED and the social economy is being rapidly moved from the margins and is aligned with some emerging “mainstream” views, even though neo-liberal thinking and policy is still powerful. This represents a significant opportunity for advancing social economy thinking and practice and, more generally, elaborating the social economy case more effectively.

BALTA research and the SE sector are situated within a much larger mainstream struggle to re-integrate and re-embed social relations into the heart of Canadian economic life. A social economy research agenda framed within this larger process must be attendant to the opportunities and challenges this new context entails. This implies, among other things, how BALTA sets priorities and focuses resources. Not every sector or individual research interest is likely to yield the same practical or policy impact.

This is well illustrated by examining the research questions and analytical domains that broadly frame the BALTA research agenda.

The Analytical Domains

In its SSHRC grant application, the BALTA proposal set out the following framework. It involved three analytical domains.

Domain one critically analysed theory and practice; exploring, probing, and elucidating exemplary SE practices or, alternatively, failed experiments. What impact does inserting social goals into enterprise and economic development have on process, results, and theory?

Domain two focused on the adaptation of demonstrable results and the scaling-up of innovations to improve social well-being. Specifically, it calls for analysis of what factors support or thwart broadening and deepening impacts of socio-economic innovation into the BC and Alberta contexts.

Domain three focused on the relationship between territorial and social enterprise approaches, the relationship between community economic and social enterprise development actors, how they are organized (or not), the strategies employed to strengthen linkages between the two, and the extent that resources are being mobilised and co-ordinated between the two.

Domain four (new) evolved through the BALTA Forum in Victoria, BC (October 2006), and subsequent reflection by the Steering Committee. Its focus is on the exploration of the *future* role and relevance of the social economy in a rapidly changing economic, political, and social landscape (see additional factors section).

Our choice of case studies and other research projects must be made with these four domain considerations explicitly in mind. To what extent do proposed research projects help us seriously probe one or more of these domains, or not?

The Central Research Questions

Another somewhat narrower screen for research proposals is made up of four central research questions:

1. What are the scope and characteristics of key sectors of the social economy in the region?

We need to better understand the social economy landscape as it exists. The mapping work being undertaken by BALTA is important in addressing this question about “key sectors of the social economy in the region.” With limited resources, the Steering Committee must decide on priorities for mapping. While the general intent is to map comprehensively, this may not be realistic. Priorities must be set to maximise the strategic relevance of our work. To some extent, this is implied by the themes of the SERCs (social economy research clusters) which, for mapping purposes, are being given priority. Nevertheless, even within the SERCs, some studies may offer more relevance to BALTA’s central purposes than others.

2. What are the scope and characteristics of social economy innovations that are achieving demonstrable social and economic results in the region or elsewhere?

We need to understand what is working and why.

3. What are the key issues, opportunities, and constraints for adapting and scaling up what is working (whether from within or outside of the region)?

We need to understand the strategies and resources relevant to successfully scaling up success across Alberta and BC.

Questions 2 and 3 are closely related. The challenge is to understand what is working (and why) in various contexts and to figure out what we need to address in order to adapt and scale-up exemplary practices or innovations in the Alberta and BC contexts.

4. How does BALTA research relate to the central question of public policy and politics as key factors within the broader social economy debate?

We need to take stock of how the BALTA research relates to political and public policy work and how the research agenda facilitates this.

The Prospects for Generating Impacts: Additional Factors to Consider

To recapitulate, during the 2006 BALTA Forum, a strong sentiment was expressed that management decisions needed to explicitly consider whether the priorities and related projects under consideration, if pursued, would have the potential for generating real advances in the social economy.

Of course, the reference to “real advances” triggers a cascade of other questions. To what extent does a particular research priority address disruptions caused by globalisation or respond to new social problems? To what extent can alliances be built through the research agenda and SE solutions identified? Can we use these alliances to more effectively mobilise and focus sector resources? Are there particular issues that creative research projects could address that would improve the prospects of the social economy in BC and Alberta? Does the research advance knowledge of how the women’s and minority constituencies employ or are benefited by social economy tools? What best practices exist and how can they be advanced most effectively in urban, rural, and remote areas and at what scale should they be managed regionally and provincially? What policy instruments should we be exploring at various levels of government and in the sector itself?

In addition, this paper has already foreshadowed some contextual factors that we need to keep in mind: the ongoing effects of neo-liberal globalisation on local economies and societies; the retreat of government from the public sphere; the colonisation of the public domain by commercial and private forces; the decline of community; the calamitous rise of individualism; environmental degradation; and the serious erosion of social and relational goods in the provision of services to people. All represent profound challenges and opportunities for the future role and relevance of the social economy.

Perhaps most challenging and relevant are some other powerful cross-cutting trends. Five current trends pose fundamental challenges for every part of society: the decline in the supply of fossil fuels and related price increases; climate change; rapid decreases in water quality, quantity, and accessibility across the continent; and, related to all three, food security issues. Lastly, of fundamental importance to Canada in the next several decades, is the aging Canadian population.

While we might debate the magnitudes and nature of each of these trends, alone and in combination they create huge challenges. One need only consider housing affordability in the face of increasing energy prices. Or consider the effects of increased individualism on public attitudes towards co-operative housing or collective social solutions. More globally, both the rise in ocean temperatures and warmer winters represent potential devastation for important economic and employment sectors, such as the salmon fishery (declining stocks) and the lumber industry (mountain pine beetle infestation). Similarly, climate change will likely disrupt food production and supply chains, and provoke largely unacknowledged food security issues across urban and rural landscapes. Recent evidence suggests climate change will also create new health challenges (e.g., the spread of tropical and semi-tropical insect-borne diseases), and alter liveability for those in inner cities and the urban poor. Housing, health care, and human services will also be challenged by a large cohort of aged people needing special care.

Solutions to these problems, while episodically apparent, are not being translated into broad-based efforts to systematically scale-up what works. Nor is there any means by which the necessary ongoing social innovation in SE is being fed into policy development and politics. Indeed, there are some that believe Canada's current pre-occupation with narrow notions of fiscal accountability is leading to institutional and policy rigidities that stifle change and innovation, thus damaging our adaptive capacity as a country. In many other OECD countries, the emphasis is on diversifying and broadening the net of innovation and experimentation, fostering engagement oriented to improving the adaptive capacity of populations and institutions.ⁱⁱⁱ In short, we are poorly organised to respond to the challenges.

An organised and strategically positioned social economy sector could conceivably be an important driver of positive change. The contribution of BALTA, modest as it may be, will have greater potential for impact if our research time, talent, and resources can be clearly and strategically linked to one or more of these larger cross-cutting trends.

But where can we **best** make a difference and add value?

Obviously, the purpose here is not to be prescriptive. Rather, it is to illustrate the idea of choosing priorities. Given what we know about the social economy and what we perceive to be its relevance to addressing current *social and policy contexts and trends*, what might be the relative leverage of choosing one SE research priority over another?

Tying Together the Strands

Confirming the Criteria

In summary, there are several possible criteria that might be posited from the foregoing discussion, all of which together help sort out the extent to which possible priorities and projects contribute, more or less, to strengthening the foundations of the social economy in BC and Alberta. A number have been identified with the following qualifications.

The Steering Committee recognises that as we apply the initial criteria, fresh issues and insights will emerge. We accept that the proposed criteria may change over time and that we need to be flexible enough that we can adapt as we learn..

For each possible research priority (and opportunity), to what extent does it aid BALTA:

1. to better understand and *critically analyse* the impact of inserting such social processes of reciprocity, solidarity, and sustainability into economic life (*re-inserting social goals into economic life*)
2. to better understand and *critically analyse* how territorial (CED) and social economy (enterprise) approaches can interact to enhance the overall potency of the social economy (*relationship between territorial and enterprise approaches*)
3. to better understand and critically analyse the social economy as it exists (*understanding the social economy as it exists*)
4. to understand and *critically analyse* the characteristics of exemplary practice wherever it occurs (*What is working and why?*)
5. to understand and *critically analyse* key issues, opportunities, and constraints for adapting and scaling-up what is working in BC and Alberta (*What supports or thwarts adaptation & scaling up?*)

For each possible research priority (and opportunity) to what extent does it enable BALTA to leverage strategic benefits by:

6. being directly relevant, even if only modestly, to addressing major cross-cutting trends and issues relevant to Canadians (*relevance to cross-cutting trends*)
7. leveraging current social economy assets and resources to scale up exemplary practices and stimulate social innovation (*potential for beneficially leveraging social economy assets*)
8. contributing to the building of relationships and alliances relevant to the central purpose of BALTA (*alliance-building potential*)
9. contributing to SE political and public policy work (*policy development*)

These nine should be considered strategic level criteria.

Not considered here is what one might call operational level criteria, matters such as BALTA capacity, current budget, potential for raising additional resources, relevance to student interests, etc. These are dealt with in the SERC work planning policy.

Tools for Applying the Criteria to Decision-Making

There are three main uses for these criteria:

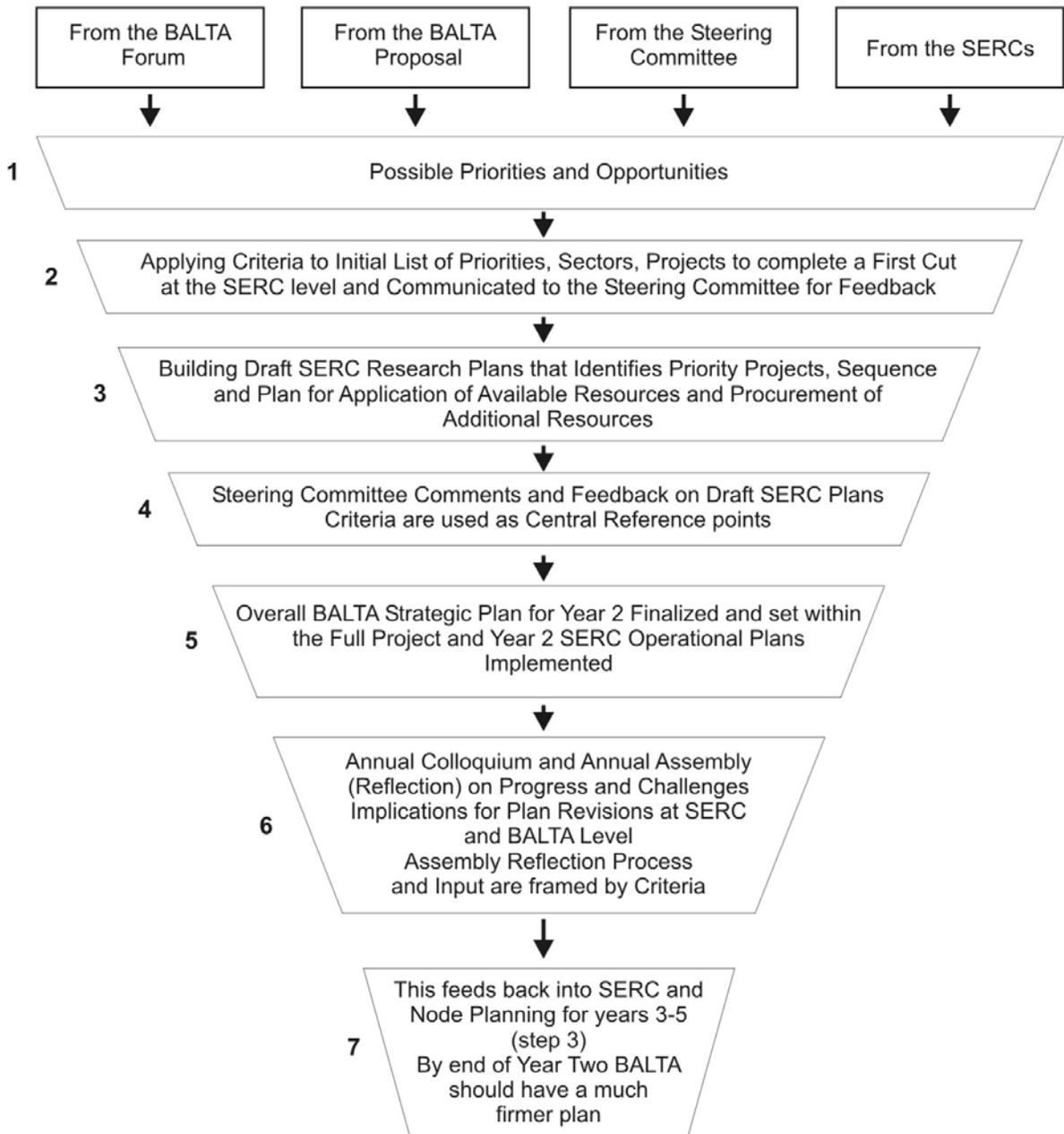
1. They are the policy foundation for strategic priority and project decisions.
2. They are a pedagogical tool that can assist BALTA from SERC to Annual Assembly levels that root our reflection, critical analysis, and planning.
3. They are a planning tool for use of the Social Economy Research Clusters and the Steering Committee.

These uses suggest their role as a kind of compass, helping us understand where we started, where we are, the general direction in which we are headed and, based on the lessons we are learning along the way, what adjustments we may want to make in the path ahead. These applications are graphically depicted in the SERC Priority and Planning Framework found on the next page.

Finally, each SERC is encouraged to use the tool found in attachment one. It allows for a systematic way of making initial priority decisions and then, within the priorities, selecting and sequencing the leading research project opportunities. For example, in the natural resources, local development, and social enterprise area, there may be several sectors identified: forestry, agriculture, tourism, fisheries, oil and gas, etc. The criteria should be used to discuss, debate, and decide what are most important for BALTA. Similarly, in the human services arena, there are many sectors: health, seniors, employment services, social services of various kinds, etc. Once priorities are established, then there are opportunities and project ideas that will be generated. The same criteria will be used to establish which project ideas are going to be given precedence.

Good luck! Let's track how it works and make changes as they are needed.

SERC Priority & Planning Framework



Attachment one follows on the next two pages

SERC Research Priorities

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES & PROJECTS	SELECTION CRITERIA									
	Re-inserting social goals into economic life									
	Relation between territorial and enterprise approaches									
	Understand the social economy as it exists									
	What is working and why									
	What supports or thwarts adaptation and scaling up									
	Relevance to cross-cutting trends									
	Potential for leveraging social economy assets									
	Alliance building potential									
	Policy development									
	Total									
Key										
0 = priority does not satisfy the criterion										
5 = priority strongly satisfies the criterion										

Endnotes

ⁱ *Community Economic Development: Perspectives on Research and Policy*, edited by Burt Galaway and Joe Hudson, Thompson Educational Publishing, 1994; and *Reinventing the Local Economy: What 10 Canadian Initiatives can Teach us about Building Creative, Inclusive, & Sustainable Communities*, Michael Lewis & Dr. Stewart Perry, 1994, Center for Community Enterprise.

ⁱⁱ The definition the BALTA alliance is working with is elaborated in BALTA Working Paper Series contribution by Mike Lewis: *Mapping the Social Economy in BC and Alberta: Towards a Strategic Approach* (posted on BALTA website).

ⁱⁱⁱ Private communication by Mark Cabaj (BALTA collaborator) conveying comments received from a visiting OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation) based in Paris.