

MUSINGS FROM THE TRENCHES

PART TWO

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IN HUMAN SERVICE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

MIKE LEWIS

While Concepts and Context (Part 1) was a fascinating and instructive introduction to conceptual and contextual issues, helping us locate CED and the social economy in a larger firmament of ideas and trends, Part 2 transports us to the specific. Indeed, this section is the first of several that delves into the practice in CED and the Social Economy organizations and strategies in much more detail

Human services and affordable housing are two constant themes in the history of CED and the social economy. This is not surprising. How we care for each other, or not, speaks centrally to the character of our social relations and what we value. If the big task is to promote the re-insertion of social and environmental goals into the heart of our economic life, as advanced in Part 1, then the smaller tasks associated with making such ideas real, enterprise by enterprise and project by project, are the crucial building blocks. Organizing services and housing in ways that empower us to better care for each other remain important arenas for expanding the social economy.

While far from presenting a comprehensive picture of social enterprise in human services, this section does help us understand the range, scope and size of the social enterprise in these sectors. Consider the relatively small training enterprises that target high-risk populations ([Mottet, 2004](#)) alongside a social enterprise building machine generating over \$50 million in annual revenues ([Fehr, 2000](#)). Or consider and contrast a new type of co-op that has mobilized a rural community to survive through collective action to secure their own health services ([Girard, 2003](#)) and a non-profit women service organization that has incubated a multi-million social enterprise in property management ([Abbott, 2005](#)). There contexts and operations are very different. However they all represent the use of business means to meet social goals and all re-invest for the benefit of the community.

Likewise, the treatment of affordable housing, while cursory, does portray initiatives in various contexts and illustrates some of the tensions and issues involved, including the difficulties created by the withdrawal of the Federal government from the co-op and social housing scene in 1994.

What is mentioned but not highlighted by many of these contributions is the web of supports that have nourished their start-up and expansion (see [Lewis, 2006](#) for elaboration). While detailed probing of the functions, organizations, institutions and policies that make up the web(s) of support will be featured in Part 4 of this volume, it is interesting to begin to read these cases here with the idea that 'no social enterprise is an island' and that central to strengthening and expanding the social economy is the strengthening and expanding the infrastructure committed to supporting social enterprise.

The notion of scaling up of what works, a key research interest of BALTA and one that recurs several times throughout this volume, is foreshadowed in 'Taking on the Youth Build Challenge' ([Lewis and Gilson, 2002](#)). Already nationally replicated across the U.S. with solid impacts on at-risk-youth and affordable housing, why could not such an approach be mobilized in Canada, and specifically in Vancouver, B.C.? The fact that an internationally recognized affordable housing model in Cape Breton was never replicated ([Stewart, 1994](#)), despite specific attempts to promote it elevates several questions. What supports or thwarts scaling up successful innovation? Is it a

problem of leadership in our sector, too much turf protection between various actors, just not being well organized or?

Perhaps the strategic 'sleeper' among all the issues in this section is Marty Donkavoorts posing of the "age-old" question – as the current leadership gets older and is about to retire, do we have the leadership, commitment and management skills coming on to keep even successful social enterprises on track?

Even a merely curious reader of this section will come away with one solid impression – nothing about social enterprise is easy. Blood, sweat and tears are an almost certain companion of successful prosecution of meeting social goals through business means. The rewards are great, changed lives and strengthened communities, but it takes guts, determination and staying power.

Of the seven BALTA research interests set out in the introduction, six are touched on by one or more of the contributions in this section.

1. **Re-inserting social goals into economic life:** to better understand and *critically analyze* the impact of inserting such social processes of reciprocity, solidarity, and sustainability into economic life, in practice and in theory.

2. **Relationship between territorial and enterprise approaches:** to better understand and *critically analyze* how territorial (CED) and social enterprise approaches can interact to enhance the overall potency of the social economy.

3. **Understand the social economy as it current exists:** to better understand and *critically analyze* the social economy as it exists.

4. **What is working and why:** to understand and *critically analyze* the characteristics of exemplary practice wherever it occurs

5. **What supports or thwarts adaptation & scaling up:** to understand and *critically analyze* key issues, opportunities, and constraints for adapting and scaling up what is working into the B.C. and Alberta contexts.

7. **What might be the future role and relevance of the social economy be:** to think about what contribution the social economy might make in a rapidly changing economic, political, social and environmental landscapes.