

## **BC-Alberta Social Economy Research Alliance (BALTA)**

### **Project Proposal – Project B2 (2007-2008)** **Sustainability and the Social Economy**

#### **A. Project Title**

**Sustainability and the Social Economy**

#### **B. Brief description of project and project objectives, outputs and proposed outcomes**

This project will examine the theoretical and practical implications of socio-ecological questions for the social economy or solidarity economy.

This research project requests \$6500.00 in funds in each of two years from BALTA's unallocated funds to match funds from Mike Gismondi's AU funds for a graduate student.

The initial proposal is three parallel avenues of research:

1) a critical review or 'reading against the grain' of the existing SE literature for evidence of reflection on the sustainability question, and analysis of the practical challenges and possibilities of converting the SE economy to sustainability principles (Some of this will arise in the SERC 2 Literature Review but we will want to extend that review to other countries such as Sweden, and across the topics in other SERC areas (such as human services and policy);

2) an initial exploration of the emerging bioeconomy and its relationship to the social economy in BC and Alberta and more broadly. For example, in SERC 2 we anticipate new theory emerging from our examination of the linkages and synergies between the social economy, resource management and rural revitalization in BC and Alberta. These relationships are relatively new and, as such, are under-theorized. This may become a cross-SERC topic, but a logical start on this lies with SERC 2, as many of the research members have experience in this area; and

3) a critical review and reflection on the implications of sustainability for measurement and indicators of wellbeing in the SE sector (this in conjunction with work being done by Mark Anielski of SERC 3, and discussions with the national SE mapping group about the environment). Many SERC2 members have strengths in sustainability indicators and that debate needs to be integrated with the ways people are measuring and conceiving indicators of the social economy's impacts.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See the University of Toronto Social Economy Centre Study Projects #14 and #17 that explore social accounting generally (with some attention to the environment) as well as specific emphasis on "social and environmental accounting tools which could be brought to bear" in ecological stewardship.  
[http://sec.oise.utoronto.ca/english/subproject\\_by\\_cluster.php](http://sec.oise.utoronto.ca/english/subproject_by_cluster.php)

## **Project Timeline**

The project will begin May 2007 and end April 2009.

## **Project Objectives**

- To critically assess the implications of the sustainability debate for social economy theory and practice.
- To look at the literature and what's out there in terms of good project models in Sweden and internationally, and critically assess what is happening elsewhere as it relates to the question of social economy, resource management, and rural revitalization in BC and AB.
- To explore how the SE sector can take a lead role in the emerging bioeconomy and the conversion economy more generally.
- To explore sustainability as it relates to performance indicators of the SE, and the measurement of SE community impacts.

## **Project Outputs**

- Academic articles for Alternatives Journal and CNS and *Sociologia Ruralis* and a CED journal; perhaps a theory chapter for the proposed SERC 2 book; a popular magazine piece for wider public; opinion pieces in major newspapers.
- Research report discussing theoretical and practical implications of the sustainability question for SE practitioners (by sector).
- Report on how to integrate sustainability inspired occupations and activities into SE taxonomies and indicators.
- Policy paper recommending a role for the SE sector in the emerging bioeconomy.

## **Project Outcomes**

- Widen the debate within the CED network about the implications of sustainability for SE theory and practices.
- Identify policy strategies for SE sector to access Federal and Provincial green funds such as the gas tax rebate or municipal infrastructure funds in ways that meet needs of SE sector.

- Identify policy and lobbying strategies to support a larger role for the SE sector in the emerging bioeconomy.

### **C. Purpose and significance of the study, including congruence of the proposed research with the over-all strategic research objectives identified for the SERC and BALTA**

The ongoing debate about the sustainability of the Canadian society and economy raises many challenges for proponents of the emerging social economy. To the question of “how much of the economy is social?,” some of us in BALTA would pose a related and perhaps more complex set of questions: “how much of the social economy is sustainable?” and “what role can the social economy sector play in the transition to a sustainable society?”

Sustainability may seem just another burden to some SE practitioners, who already provide jobs, housing, and human services for segments of society not served by corporations, the market or the state. Yet a quick scan of SE organizations in BC and AB shows a small and increasing number of social economy type enterprises in part organized with attention to sustainability principles. These organizations range from ecotourism or fair trade retail companies, local economic trading systems, alternative energy coops and collectives (wind power; micro-hydro; regional heating; regional utilities coops), biofuels coops (or those farming agrofuel crops or initiating agrofuel production) to local organic food businesses, clothing and household recycling stores, and housing energy efficiencies firms. The scan mentions Aboriginal groups that harvest non-timber renewable forest products such as medicinal plants and foods, and conservation societies that purchase land to remove it from the exploitable land base.

All of these activities recognize the need for community economic development to engage the changing relationship between livelihood, liveability, and environment. Some or all of these activities are consciously organized within an SE model or solidarity economy model, and others could be. Whether they are sustainable in an ecological sense (i.e. embedded in local communities and ecosystems and entropy friendly) or achieve a degree of sustainability in a triple bottom line accounting sense, or in terms of the six types of community capital set out by Roseland et al.'s *Toward Sustainable Communities*, requires more analysis.

Increased public concern about climate change and environmental degradation opens up the socio-political debate on sustainability beyond merely greening the SE sector itself. With an emphasis on the “environment, community, economy nexus” in a global world – it gets us beyond the traditional CED and development focus on job creation and growth. The social, cultural and political debate on sustainability creates opportunities to change the way that citizens, governments and CED practitioners see the social economy, offering some prospects to increase the role of the social economy in Canada, as we debate the transition to a more sustainable economy.

For example, affordable housing becomes more sustainable when it is ecohousing (built in a manner less damaging to the ecosystem and no longer an energy hog), or organic food

becomes truly sustainable when coops recognize the unsustainable energy trade-offs as they sell into distant markets and reorient more locally.

Equally, another goal of the research is to ensure that governments recognize a preferred role for community based social economy organizations and enterprises in current discussions around food security and the bioeconomy sector (which addresses energy security and rural revitalization in its discussions of biofuels, alternative energy, and more).

Therefore, the overarching purpose of this study is to research how established social economy organizations successfully integrate social, environmental, and economic development in their work; how they incorporate sustainability practices and policies into a more holistic approach to local economic development; and how we might strategize to position the SE sector in the emerging economic trends of ecohousing, food security, alternative energy and most importantly, the bioeconomy.

### **Strategic Relevance to BALTA Project**

The proposed research speaks to the broader questions (theoretical and operational) of sustainability in the future of the social economy.

In doing so the research into sustainability intersects with a number of BALTA research domains and questions such as how to insert the social economy as social goal into the Canadian economy; and specific opportunities or obstacles for scaling up practical social enterprises that focus on sustainability.

The politics of sustainability is also a cross cutting trend in Canada and the research could identify opportunities for alliance building between green and CED practitioners / activists. As well, the research could contribute to strategizing policy development and lobbying tactics around SE in an age of climate change, bioeconomics, and shifts in the make-up of the economy as Canadian's explore non-renewable energy solutions.

#### **D. Will this project be led and managed by a SERC member or members or will it require a request for proposals?**

The project will be led and managed by Mike Gismondi.

#### **E. Lead researcher, organization name and contact information (when known)**

Mike Gismondi will coordinate and manage the project, but the three project lead researchers will jointly direct the research.

Mike Gismondi, Professor and Director, Master of Arts – Integrated Studies, Athabasca University, Alberta – [mikeg@athabascau.ca](mailto:mikeg@athabascau.ca)

Co-Researcher – Mark Roseland, Professor, Centre for Sustainable Community Development, Simon Fraser University, BC. - [roseland@sfu.ca](mailto:roseland@sfu.ca)

Co-Researcher – Mary Beckie, Division of Government Studies, Faculty of Extension, University of Alberta - [mary.beckie@ualberta.ca](mailto:mary.beckie@ualberta.ca)

**F. Names of other researchers and organizations involved (when known)**

I expect that other members of SERC 2 might want to provide some collaborative advice.

Noel Keough, Assistant Professor, Dept. Environmental Design, University of Calgary and PlanNet, Calgary.

**G. Will the project involve hiring one or more student researchers? Will they need to be recruited or have they already been identified?**

Yes, this project will be hiring one main student researcher every year. The student researcher will be recruited as per BALTA policy.

**H. Brief description of project roles and responsibilities for project participants (lead researcher, other researchers, student researchers, partner organizations).**

The co-leads will oversee student researcher recruitment, develop project parameters, supervise student researcher(s), ensure budget compliance and assess and monitor work of student researcher(s).

The co-leads have considerable experience organizing collective writing and this project will provide opportunities for collaborative writing (faculty and graduate student).

Co-leads and collaborators will provide background documents, suggestions for case studies, assistance with assessment of student researcher, and project input and feedback where applicable. They will also be expected to contribute to the collaborative writing of the output papers.

Student researcher(s) will review the existing literature review and read it against the grain to capture the social imaginary (what Charles Taylor describes as widely held, common cultural, historical, political, and ecological understandings which make possible common practices and offer a widely shared sense of legitimacy) of a future social economy that is more sustainable; assess geographic and spatial aspects of that green social economy (north / south; urban/rural); critically reflect on the obstacles and success factors for going green in B.C. and Alberta, and prepare draft and final research reports, articles, and popular pieces.

## I. Indicative Budget

Mike Gismondi expects to use his RA funds to finance the student researcher/s for both years. He is asking for matching funds.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Requested of BALTA</b>	<b>Other Contributions</b>
Student salaries & benefits	6 k from unallocated funds in matching dollars/annum	\$6000.00 in 2007-8 and \$6000.00 2008-9 Mike Gismondi RA fund
Researcher Release Time		
Research Support Costs		500/annum
Knowledge Dissemination	Support of staff to assist with publication preparation as required; no additional funds required.	
Travel	Conference travel 500/annum	
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>6500 2007-8; 6500 - 2008-9</b>	<b>\$6500/annum</b>