

# The Political Imperative

*Civil Society & the Politics of Empowerment*

BY NANCY NEAMTAN

*There's a driving desire in this country right now for deep change to the way we live and govern ourselves. I see it in the women's movement, the co-op movement, the environmental movement, in labour, in community economic development organizations, and social enterprises. In one way or another, we all perceive that a cultural shift in this country has become a matter of necessity.*

*But the reality is that such a shift is not going to happen without a political process. To make deep change happen, we must gather allies, develop a common agenda, design policy alternatives, and have a hand in implementing them.*

It's not easy. It's trying, even painful, and takes years of sustained effort. But it's not impossible. It's a matter of getting political – not partisan – and I have been an active and enthusiastic participant in this process in Québec for the last 20 years.

## **Rethinking Social & Economic Development**

In 1983 I was a community organizer in southwest Montréal, one of the poorest urban communities in Canada. That was the year that the first “work for welfare” programs were created specifically aimed at youth. Our reaction was two-fold. We denounced the short term and coercive elements of these programs. That was the easy part. At the same time, we could not deny that the people on welfare in our community wanted to work. That was what they were asking us every day.

So rather than get stuck protesting the way people were to be forced off welfare, we took as a basic postulate that our local economy was *not* creating opportunities for the poor and marginalized. In fact, the process of economic development was itself creating more and more marginalization. Our logic and naiveté led us to believe that our only option was to turn around the very way in which economic and social development occurred in our community.

Many community activists condemned our action. Economic development was not our business, they claimed. “Getting involved” would mean dirtying our hands and making too many

compromises. The role of social movements was to protest, not to help create jobs and certainly not to work with other economic actors. We were convinced, however, that mere protest would abandon our population to permanent marginalization.

So we proceeded by trial and error. First we allied with local labour unions, then with local business people, politicians, and institutions, and finally with government. Within ten years, our efforts to redefine the way economic and social development took place in Montréal's southwest had plenty of allies. RESO, the *Regroupement pour la relance économique et social du Sud-Ouest*, had arisen in our neighbourhoods. Originally a coalition of community groups involved in health, housing, and welfare, it had grown into a major nonprofit whose membership and governance involved unions, the private sector, community groups, cultural actors, institutions, and local residents. Like other community economic development corporations (CEDCs) that would emerge in communities and urban neighbourhoods across Québec, RESO took a role in economic development, urban planning, training, social integration – and whatever else needed to be done to revitalize the community in an inclusive perspective.

## **A Full Partner in Policy Development**

The CEDCs represent a major cultural shift toward collaborative partnership in Québec over the past 20 years. This same culture has also been evident at the policy level, in the field of labour force development.

Since 1994 representatives of the community sector have been full-fledged members of the *Commission des partenaires du Marché de travail* (CPMT). The Québec government created the CPMT in that year to help define and implement labour force development policy in collaboration with Emploi-Québec, the government agency responsible for workforce development programs and initiatives. On the CPMT board are representatives of the major labour unions, business associations, education institutions, and us – a threesome who represent a coalition of networks of community organizations active in employment services, advocacy, local and community economic development, and adult education. This array of stakeholders debate and act on such issues as welfare-to-work, continued education, workplace training, sectoral strategies, and strategies for women and the handicapped. The CPMT is an institutional setting for cultural shifts in policy.

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It was because of my role in the CPMT that I became involved in yet another cultural shift. In 1996, facing a 12% unemployment rate and significant difficulties with government finances and debt, the Québec government organized a Summit on the Economy and Employment. Invited were leaders from big business, employers' associations, unions, municipalities, institutional networks, churches, and representatives of important social and community movements. The government challenged us to come up with strategies for economic renewal and job creation, and to that end, proposed the creation of a working group on employment and economic development led by representatives of civil society. I was drafted to preside over this group, which came to be known as the *Chantier de l'économie sociale* (roughly translated, the Task Force on the Social Economy). We had six months to propose job creation strategies that would be acceptable to the participants of the summit and not too costly for government.

This proved an immense challenge. For one thing, nobody was quite sure what we were talking about. The term "social economy" had never been widely used to that point in Québec.

As luck would have it, we soon discovered that we were all part of it. For the social economy is an ensemble of activities and organizations that share five principles and structural elements. Social economy enterprises

- aim to serve their members or the community as a whole, instead of striving for financial profit alone.
- are neither private businesses nor public agencies.
- establish a democratic decision-making process that involves the participation of users and workers.
- give priority to people and work rather than capital in the distribution of revenue and surplus.
- are based on principles of participation, empowerment, and individual and collective responsibility.

From this we could see that the social economy was not a new concept. It had been in fact a part of the socio-economic landscape in Québec and Canada for over 100 years in the form of credit unions, agricultural co-operatives, and others. Even without considering the Desjardins credit unions and the two largest agricultural co-operatives, the social economy in Québec

today accounts for over 10,000 collective enterprises and community organizations, which employ over 100,000 workers.

But getting the definition straight was only the first problem for our working group. The second one was to defend the idea of democratic economic development in the ideological context of the time. People on the left and on the right viewed us with suspicion.

And the biggest challenge of all? It was convincing the diverse constituents of the social economy – the co-operatives, community groups, local development workers, community business associations, and sector-based organizations – of the necessity to work together. For I was convinced that the only way to make visible gains was to work together towards shared objectives and a common goal.

(above) Protesting the lack of affordable housing in Montréal. Photocredit: Front d'action populaire en réaménagement urbain (FRAPRU).

## Digging Deeper in Saint-Michel

A massive scar on Montréal's landscape, the old Miron and Francon Quarries together covered 46% of what has become the neighbourhood of Saint Michel. Throughout most of the 20th century, these quarries employed thousands of people. They brought first prosperity, then decline, leaving behind an area marked by the disintegration of the urban fabric and further divided by the raised Metropolitan Boulevard, a major east-west artery.

Villeray-Saint-Michel-Park Extension is Montreal's poorest borough, the city's second most highly populated and most densely populated. The search for a new use for the massive stone quarries has gone on since they closed in the 1980's.

From 1968 to 1999, Montreal buried half of the province's garbage in the Miron Quarry. In partnership with the City, the private consortium Gazmont now generates electricity from the biogas created by the decomposition of that garbage. The areas surrounding the site are gradually being given over to use for educational, sports, and cultural activities.

So what to do with the Francon Quarry? In 1999, Camping Montreal came up with a development plan for a camping and caravanning centre there. This social economy enterprise created a business plan with help from CEDTAP, the **Community Economic Development Technical Assistance Program** affiliated with Carleton University and funded by the McConnell Foundation.

The developers designed a project as remarkable as the site itself. The Francon Quarry has the look of Colorado's Grand Canyon, in the heart of a metropolis. The city can disappear behind its high rock faces. Nature has reclaimed its rights over a site left abandoned, harsh and silent.

This site will offer 325 luxury campsites for the campers and caravans of tourists and snowbirds. One of the largest urban caravanning sites in North America, this sophisticated development will create a tourist attraction and connect a well-off clientele with a highly attractive product. The training of local labour will increase the flexibility and mobility of local workers. The borough will equip itself with a growing industry that offers residents the possibility of progress. ■

*As hard as we are fighting against what is wrong, we are working even harder to figure out what is right & then to do it.... There has to be a substantial move from opposition to proposition & from conservation to innovation in our political discourse.*

What was this common work? In the prevailing ideological context, in which individual or private for-profit initiatives were considered the ideal or unique model, we had to demonstrate the potential of collective enterprise or organizations. We had to define the social economy clearly and make its past achievements more visible. We had to propose a series of sectoral strategies that would foster new economic activity, responsive to social, economic, and environmental need. Finally, we had to identify the conditions under which the social economy could emerge and flourish. Among their conclusions in this respect were

- a formal recognition of the role of the social economy within the socio-economic landscape in Québec.
- the integration of local and regional development policies that would ensure support for collective enterprise.
- equal access to the development incentives offered to traditional enterprise.
- changes in co-operatives legislation to permit the creation of solidarity co-operatives.
- the establishment of new training and funding tools.

This plan of action, submitted in October 1996, received enthusiastic support from some; others viewed it with suspicion or scepticism. But the fact is that in the past seven years we have delivered the goods. Not only have most of the plan's elements been accomplished, but many new plans, projects, and initiatives have also been developed and implemented. Nonprofit and co-operative enterprises have flourished, responding to a variety of challenges and needs: social inclusion, creation of jobs and new accessible services, recycling, social tourism, alternative cultural production, community radio and television, and jobs for the handicapped. Unions, community groups, women's groups, environmental militants, fair trade activists, international development agencies, and even some private sector actors have worked closely together in a movement for a more democratic, pluralist and inclusive economy. It's been one more profound cultural change.

Does that mean we have given up fighting what is wrong? No way. Only last year thousands and thousands mobilized to force the adoption of a law against poverty. But as hard as we are fighting against what is wrong, we are working even harder to figure out what is right and then to do it.

Today, the Chantier is approaching its fifth anniversary as a fixture on Quebec's social and economic landscape. There is a board of 28 people elected by different electoral colleges that represent the diverse realities of the social economy. The Chantier's membership and directors include representatives of networks of co-operative and nonprofit enterprise, of local and community economic development networks and representatives of the many large social movements that share the values and vision of the social economy.

The Chantier is a network of networks whose purpose is to promote the social economy. It supports new projects, encourages consultation between the diverse actors in this sector, and ensures that they have representation in the public domain. One

major initiative that the Chantier has backed is the *Réseau d'investissement social du Québec* that makes \$10 million in private and public monies available for investment in social economy ventures. The Chantier also co-directs an inter-university research partnership involving four universities and a series of social economy networks. Through the *Comité sectoriel de main-d'oeuvre de l'économie sociale et de l'action communautaire* (Social Economy and Community Action Human Resources Committee) the Chantier works to improve the skills of workers, managers, and volunteer boards in diverse sectors of activity.

All in all, it's a far cry from a temporary working group created for the 1996 Summit.

## Achieving Critical Mass

The social economy is one of the strongest and most visible progressive movements in today's Québec. It owes its strength to many factors, the greatest of which is the fabulous work that social entrepreneurs are doing in communities across Québec. But it is also strong because we have been able to network the networks. We have managed to work on what unites us and not what divides us. We work together to find solutions by trying new ways of doing things.

Now all this makes a good story that I love to tell. But the fundamental question is this: how does one bring about this kind of cultural shift in community and in public policy?

There is no simple answer, of course. Yet somehow or another some major cultural shifts will have to occur in communities and within civil society if we want to see the changes in policy that most of us desperately wish for.

One thing is certain – it is not just a matter of having “evidence.” I don't want to underestimate the role of research and evaluation. But if evidence is what drives change in the world, neo-liberal ideology should have been dead and buried years ago. Isn't the disaster in Africa sufficient evidence that the current form of globalization doesn't work? Isn't the rising poverty and violence in many industrialized countries sufficient to put in doubt the current neo-liberal agenda?

The fact is that while we may be *right*, we are not *in control*. The only way to change things is to unite our voices, deepen our roots, and create the alliances necessary to move our agenda forward in a way that is political, but non-partisan.

Here are some ideas about the cultural shifts that have to happen and the ingredients that can make them happen.

First there has to be a shift within the community sector and within social movements in Canada. There has to be a substantial



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move from opposition to proposition and from conservation to innovation in the political discourse.

That kind of change is already happening in a concrete way in communities all over the place. But it doesn't seem to be appearing in a clear and co-ordinated way on a public policy agenda. Even if the evidence is there, the linkages between best practices and research and best policies are not being promoted in a co-ordinated way. Nor are they being co-ordinated with various social movements that share these values and concerns. The dialogue between CED practitioners and the union movement, the environmental movement or the women's movement, for example, has not been seriously structured. The Voluntary Sector Initiative perceives itself as outside the CED/social economy agenda whereas in fact, the groups it represents are often involved locally in CED or social economy initiatives. At a time when we are attempting to create a groundswell in support of CED/social economy across Canada, these movements are potentially important strategic allies.

The social economy movement took off in Québec when we started to understand that by putting together all our individual or sectoral successes we could realize a critical mass in terms of jobs, impact, service delivery, and increased collective control of the means of production. In Québec we now represent 7% of the GNP.

Which brings me to a second, urgent cultural shift: putting aside nostalgia for the welfare state and instead rethinking what progressive government should look like in the 21st Century.

This is a fundamental question. It means moving away from the idea that choices in development are based either on the private sector or the public sector, and recognizing that we live in a pluralist economy. There is a role for another major actor – call it the social economy, the third sector, or invent another name – by means of which civil society takes a hand in the production and delivery of goods and services for the sake of the collective good. Until this social economy begins to define itself as an economic and social force, independent of the state and not creatures of it, how can we expect to influence policy in a significant way?

Another cultural shift that must take place is in the way we understand the link between social and economic development. Although instinctively or even intellectually many people agree that the two are linked, we continue to talk about things like

welfare-to-work as “social issues.” Rather than restrict the discussion to the social sector and government, we must challenge the private sector, the union movement, and educational institutions and make it their problem as well. For we will never solve the enormous problems before us if we do not find ways for the social sector to impose itself as an actor in economic development to democratize our economy.

These are three key cultural shifts but there are many others, particularly in the areas of continued education and economic and social policy. There are no shortcuts through them. There is no way to avoid the debates and often painful confrontations that are essential to them.

In Québec, there has been no shortage of either. Public sector workers have worried that we would be accomplices to the privatization of public services. Some community organizations felt that redefining themselves as economic actors was equivalent to selling their souls. Others feared that by concentrating on development we would forget our role in advocacy.

Yet we have come through these debates stronger than ever. They have been necessary and for the most part, constructive. The presence of social movements within the structure of the Chantier has even made these debates an integral and institutionalized part of our dynamics. At the same time, the Chantier has enabled us to negotiate policy shifts that are far from perfect but certainly have helped us move the debate and the practice forward.

We have at hand not only the evidence but also the opportunity for some policy shifts that could make a difference for marginalized people across Canada. Do we have all the answers? No. But it seems to me that we do have a darn good idea of what can work. The question is – do we have the ambition and the capacity to take this discussion to another level by working collaboratively to bring about real change? I certainly hope so.



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(above) Neighbourhood meeting in southwest Montréal. Photocredit: Carrefour québécois de développement local.