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Book Review by David LePage

Social Economy: Communities, Economies and Solidarity in Atlantic Canada. Edited by *Sonja Novkovic & Leslie Brown*. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press, 2012. 260 pp. ISBN 9781897009680

The authors' goal in *The Social Economy: Communities, Economies and Solidarity in Atlantic Canada* is to provide "a snapshot of the social economy as seen through the work of a large and diverse collaborative research network." This is a very audacious task when one considers that in this edited book, Luc Theriault states the often-overlooked fact that the social economy "was relatively unknown in English-speaking Canada until a few years ago" (p. 23). Within the book, this premise—that outside of Québec, the concept of social economy was not used or well understood prior to 2005—is shared amongst the authors; however, regardless of this self-identified challenge, the book manages to address and even go beyond this limitation by providing the reader something more thorough than a "snapshot."

The Social Economy: Communities, Economies and Solidarity in Atlantic Canada is the result of the research of the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network (SESRN), the Atlantic node of the Canada-wide Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Social Economy Research Project. The book contributes to, from the Atlantic region perspective, the evolving Canada-wide research resulting from this funding and explains the compelling place and role of the social economy in this region. The book uses the depth and breadth of the SESRN research to portray four key areas: in Part One, a macro picture in *The Social Economy of Atlantic Canada*; in Part Two, local stories and case studies to review *Mobilizing to Meet Community Needs*; in Part Three, *Evaluation and Measurements*; and in Part Four, looking forward with *Policy Directions for Social Economy*.

The book takes on the task of capturing the Atlantic research node efforts over the past six years and provides a very sound basis to understand the macro picture of the social economy in this region, especially in Parts One and Four; and on to the micro level with several case studies of social economy organizations particularly in Parts Two and Three. Sometimes the different and separate pieces of research findings made for difficult reading for me, with perspectives changing as I moved through the book, but then I realized that editorial methodology was essential in order to capture the breadth of engagement and the explorations of different uses of the collaborative research model in SESRN.

The book is a fascinating exploration of social economy definition discussions combined with local community-based case studies. Accomplishing this range of presentation of the research was done well, while still allowing

for the fact that “within the SESRN, there is certainly no consensus on a definition [of the social economy]” (p. 192). Importantly, as is apparent throughout the book, “this has not prevented us from collaborating in research, and in policy analysis and dialogue” (p. 8). In fact, *The Social Economy: Communities, Economies and Solidarity in Atlantic Canada* deals directly with the issue of definition. Jan Myers delves into the challenges of the definition and identity issues in her chapter Overview of Policy Initiatives and Gaps in Atlantic Canada.

Much of the book for me was very reflective of my experience as part of BALTA, the BC-Alberta Social Economy Research Node of the SSHRC Social Economy research. Both projects were participatory research efforts in themselves, engaging academic, community, and government partners. Along with the value of the diversity of the partners, there were the challenges created as a result of this diversity because each component of the collaboration came to the table with their own definitions, relationships, and expectations. The actual process of working on a common issue (even if it was not entirely clear or shared by everyone exactly what the issue was) created important social and intellectual capital outcomes. Although there was not a specific chapter in the book on process, this shared research model weaves value and valuable analysis throughout. Many of the chapters reflect the SESRN collaborative cross-sector engagement model of their research, which is even reflected in the writing of the book itself, where the co-authors of chapters are from various sectors and perspectives.

Brown and Millar point out early on that “[i]n the Atlantic Provinces there is no tradition of thinking about a social economy—not in government, not among organizations that are part of the social economy, and not within the universities. Indeed we found the social economy is not a term that is readily understood and embraced” (p. 40). As we see in the flow of the book, the field has changed, from a place in the beginning of the research process of asking, “what is the social economy?” to the final piece in the book by Karaphillis and Asimkos outlining Policy Recommendations for Financing Social Economy Organizations in Atlantic Canada. When you finish this book, you understand the value created by the collaboration, the development of the shared language, and developed understanding of the social economy.

In English Canada we likely will never have the robustness and shared understanding of Québec’s “économie sociale” (p. 192)—but this book, as well as the entirety of the work of SESRN and the social economy research results from across Canada, definitely contribute to our understanding of the “evolving and changing nature” of the social economy in Canada.

If you’re interested in Canada’s social economy “story,” I would recommend *The Social Economy: Communities, Economies and Solidarity in Atlantic Canada*. The book provides a solid overview of the Atlantic perspective and complements the research and experiences evolving in other geographic regions. Thanks to the authors and contributors for a valuable contribution.

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