

Locating a Window of Opportunity in the Social Economy: Canadians with Disabilities and Labour Market Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the labour force participation of working-age adults with disabilities, and proposes nonprofits and community agencies as sites for employing disabled Canadians. It documents employment trends over the last 15 years and how they compare to those for people without disabilities. The employment reform agenda of the Canadian disability movement is outlined as two broad approaches: distributional improvements and structural innovations. Inclusive and gainful employment is regarded as an essential part of economic and social citizenship. The challenges of labour force participation for adults with disabilities are then related to recent reports on Canada's aging population and to Harper government policies on employment for Canadians with disabilities. Finally, it explores applying a disability inclusion lens to the operations of social economy organizations.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article porte sur la participation active des adultes en âge de travailler ayant des incapacités et propose la possibilité d'organismes sans but lucratif et des organismes communautaires comme un site d'emploi pour les Canadiens handicapés. Il documente les tendances de l'emploi au cours des 15 dernières années et comment ils se comparent aux personnes non handicapées. Le programme de réformes du travail du mouvement des personnes handicapées est décrite et approches de la réforme sont dites de diviser en deux grandes catégories : des améliorations et innovations structurelles. Travail rémunéré et inclusif est considéré comme une partie essentielle de la citoyenneté économique et sociale avec le préposé aux droits et responsabilités. Les défis de la participation de la population active pour les adultes ayant une déficience sont ensuite liés aux rapports publics récents sur la population vieillissante du Canada et aux décisions prises par le gouvernement conservateur Harper sur l'emploi pour les Canadiens ayant une déficience. Apprentissage politique et connaissances transfert peut se produire en appliquant une lentille d'inclusion des personnes handicapées aux activités des organisations d'économie sociale.

Keywords / Mots clés : Disability movement; Harper government; Population aging; Public policy / Mouvement des personnes handicapées; Gouvernement Harper; Vieillesse de la population; Politiques publiques

INTRODUCTION

Canadians with disabilities are among the most marginalized individuals in the country. The labour market realities in Canada that working-age adults with physical and mental disabilities confront are daunting: they have a lower level of labour force participation and a higher level of unemployment than Canadians without disabilities, and considerable underemployment; they are more likely to experience social barriers and workplace discrimination; and they have a higher level of poverty and greater dependence on welfare than other citizens. In 2010, the labour force participation rate for people with disabilities was 57.1 percent compared to 80.5 percent for people without disabilities; and among those in the labour force, people with disabilities experienced a higher level of unemployment (11.4 versus 7.0 percent). Too often, Canadians with disabilities are segregated in sheltered workshops or day programs (Prince, 2009). They also generally lack access to the mainstream employment programs and support measures that would allow them to participate more fully in the workforce and achieve better social and economic results. Where persons with disabilities do have access to mainstream employment programs, they are also marginalized. Mainstream programs are tailored to abled individuals, and service providers desire individuals who can pass through their training in a straightforward manner, increasing their numbers of clients and, subsequently, their funding. Disabled Canadians are not getting the support they need to realistically consider gainful employment in the labour force—whether the traditional mainstream economy or the social economy—as a viable option. There is both a real urgency and an opportunity to explore new approaches for enabling hundreds of thousands of adults with disabilities to work in accessible, inclusive, and rewarding places of employment. Insofar as the current architecture of labour market policy for Canadians with disabilities is ineffective and in need of a redesign, what role can the social economy play in providing meaningful and gainful employment to persons with disabilities? Social economy is understood in broad terms to encompass alternative businesses, community economic development, social enterprises, cooperatives, and voluntary-based and community nonprofit agencies (Mook, Quarter, & Ryan, 2010; Shragge & Church, 1998; Vaillancourt & Tremblay, 2002), some of which are disability organizations that include service agencies or community businesses serving psychiatric survivors.

The primary purposes of this article are to examine the challenges of labour force participation confronting working-age adults with disabilities; and to propose and explore the possibilities of the social economy as a site of employment for disabled Canadians. The discussion is based on an analysis of federal government policy documents and reports by national disability organizations, a review of academic literature, and a reflection on 20 years of participant observations in the disability sector.¹ In broad terms, the focus is on linking the issue of Canada's aging population to recent federal policy developments on disability with nonprofits and social economy organizations. This is a topic generally unexamined in the Canadian context, so by necessity this article is in part exploratory in nature. Accordingly, the objectives of the article are to understand disability as a concept, a lived reality and social policy issue; to examine current political thinking about population aging, labour markets, and people with disabilities; and to offer some lines of research for future inquiries. The intention is to better connect research on nonprofits and the social economy with research in the field of disability studies.

To set the analytical context that follows, a number of premises and propositions can be identified. Disability is a fluid, diverse, and complex phenomenon as is the world of work and labour markets. The scope, nature, and potentiality of employment for people with disabilities are as much a political question as a matter of economic

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policy. Employing people with disabilities in inclusive and rewarding work remains a large challenge and unrealized objective of economic and social policy in Canada. It will be suggested that a policy window of opportunity appears to be opening in Canada on this issue. Certain community economic development organizations—credit unions, co-operatives, nonprofits, and other social economy organizations—already play a role in employing people with disabilities, though at times, it must be acknowledged, in ways problematic to realizing real work for real pay. Thus, more can be done in research and in public programming to advance the employment of disabled Canadians in the market economy and the social economy, specifically in ways that extend and deepen the continuum of labour force participation opportunities.

The rest of the article is organized in five parts. The first introduces the concept of disability and provides some overview information on who are the disabled people in Canadian society. The second part examines labour market realities for people with disabilities—specifically employment trends over the last 15 years—and how they compare to those for people without disabilities. This part also describes the disability community's employment policy reform agenda. The third part relates the challenges of labour force participation confronting working-age adults with disabilities to recent public reports on Canada's aging population and to decisions made by the Harper government regarding employment for Canadians with disabilities. The fourth part explores the possibility of a window of opportunity, as well as a responsibility, within the social economy sector in hiring and retaining people with disabilities. It also identifies research questions that could serve as an agenda for future research collaboration between disability studies and social economy studies. The article closes by offering general observations.

CANADIANS LIVING WITH DISABILITY

In social surveys conducted by Statistics Canada, disability is often defined in terms of people with a physical condition, a mental condition, or with health problems that reduce the amount or nature of activities they can do at home, at work, at school, in transportation, in recreation and leisure, or in other community endeavours. This sort of definition represents a functional limitation or biomedical model of impairment (Neufeldt, 2003). A social environment perspective, in comparison, generally emphasizes public attitudes, built environments, service delivery systems, and social structures. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which Canada ratified in 2010, refers to people with a disability as people with “physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others” (United Nations Enable, 2007, p. 2). This statement blends the functional model with a social environment perspective and the core idea of social equality or parity (Lord & Hutchison, 2007; McCreath, 2011; Rice & Prince, 2013).

A recent statement by the Council of Canadians with Disabilities (CCD) nicely conveys the diversity, and thus universality, of disability as well as something of the intersectionalities of disability with other markers of social identity.

We are women and men, boys and girls, moms and dads, children and seniors, workers and the unemployed, students and teachers, leaders in our communities and recipients of services. We are long-time citizens and new Canadians, we are members of visible minority communities and Aboriginal and First Nations Peoples and we are people with disabilities. (2013, p. 1)

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Human rights advocates, and some human rights commissions across the country, interpret disability in broad and flexible terms by taking into account not only the functional condition of an individual but also discrimination based on perceptions, stereotypes, and social constructs (Prince, 2009; Stienstra, 2012). In an intimation to aging, the CCD adds that “at some point in our lives we all will use services built and designed to make Canada more accessible and inclusive” (2013, p. 1). In this context, then, issues of disability are seen as having to do with all Canadians.

As the focus of this article is on labour force participation, this overview of disability focuses on working-age people with disabilities; that is, as typically defined in social survey research, people between the ages of 15 to 64. In 2006, people with disabilities made up 16.5 percent of the adult population (15 years and older) in Canada or nearly 4.2 million people.² Some 55 percent of adults with disabilities are women and 45 percent are men, compared with 51 and 49 percent, respectively, of people without disabilities. In the working-age population, people between the ages of 15 to 64 years, there were nearly 2.5 million working-age people with disabilities compared to 18.9 million working-age people without disabilities. People with disabilities represent 11 percent of the overall working-age population and, even among non-seniors, the working age-population with disabilities is a comparatively older group than those adults without disabilities. Most adults with disabilities report having three or more disabilities. The most common types of disability are pain, agility, and mobility, followed by learning, hearing, seeing, and speaking, and then psychiatric, memory, and developmental disabilities. The main causes of disabilities are an accident, collision, or injury; a disease or illness; and, then, work conditions (Furrie, 2010). In terms of severity, a majority of Canadians with disabilities report a mild (34.8 percent) to moderate (25.4 percent) disability, while a sizeable minority report a severe (26.6 percent) or very severe (13.2 percent) disability. In 2006, of the 2.5 million working-age adults with disabilities, 20.5 percent lived below the poverty line compared to 10.2 percent of people without disabilities. In fact, for disabled Canadians who are poor, social assistance, the last resort safety net program, is the primary source of income. Not surprisingly, people with a disability are far less likely to be in poverty if they are employed all year round and especially if they have full-time work. Precarious employment, however, is a common situation for many people with disabilities (Furrie, 2010; Wilton, 2006).

LABOUR MARKET REALITIES FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

In both absolute and comparative terms, people with disabilities are a significant unrealized pool of workers for the Canadian economy. The participation rate of people with disabilities (57.2 percent) is notably lower than Aboriginal peoples living off reserves (75.0 percent), recent immigrants (77.1 percent), and less-skilled Canadians with high school or less (79.0 percent), (Canada, 2012). Other labour market realities for people with disabilities include: a lower rate of labour force participation for people with disabilities compared to people without disabilities (57.1 versus 80.5 percent in 2010); a higher level of unemployment (11.4 versus 7.0 percent); more widespread underemployment; fewer weeks employed in a year (26.8 versus 39.7 in 2010); and lower average employment income than that of people without disabilities who have similar levels of education (Spector, 2012). For people with cognitive and developmental disabilities, the world of work is a community day program or sheltered workshop detached from mainstream employment. Employment preparation of a rudimentary kind may take place in adult day programs and activity centres, where the emphasis is usually on social services, recreation and leisure, and life skills training. Vocational training and support services can take place in ability centres and sheltered workshops and local employment service agencies may facilitate work experience placements for clients with disabilities. Employment continues to occur in sheltered workshops even

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though the federal government ended funding for such activities more than a decade ago, to the chagrin of many in the disability community (Canadian Association for Community Living, 2012; Nova Scotia, 2008).

Furrie (2010) has looked at the employment effects of those people with disabilities in the labour force who report having experienced occasional or frequent limitations at work due to their condition. Effects included changing the amount of work done, changing the kind of work done, changing jobs, working part-time because of the condition, and being unemployed for a period. In addition, the single most common type of complaint as reported by federal and provincial human rights agencies tends to be disability related and employment related; in particular, complaints by disabled people already with a job in the workplace (see, for example, Canadian Human Rights Commission, 2012). Perceived discrimination in the workplace encompasses being refused an interview, refused a job, refused a promotion, given less responsibility, or paid less than co-workers. Other forms are being denied accommodation and denied work-related benefits. This points to challenges of negative public attitudes and actions (Burge, Ouellette, Kuntz, & Lysaght, 2007; Canada, 2013; McCreath, 2011), barriers to employment searches (Cohen, Goldberg, Istvanffy, Stainton, Wask, & Woods, 2008), unequal power relations (Chouinard & Crooks, 2005), unmet needs for job accommodations, and other policy and practice hurdles at workplaces facing people with disabilities (Church, Frazee, Panitch, Luciani, & Bowman, 2007).

Recent employment trends

In the recession of the early 1990s, the employment rate gap between people with disabilities and people without disabilities widened from 30.7 percent in 1991 to 34.8 percent in 1996. As economic growth resumed and continued through the later 1990s into the mid-2000s, the employment rate gap between adults with disabilities and adults without disabilities narrowed, declining from 23.1 percent in 2001 to 20.5 percent in 2006. The participation rate of people with disabilities grew more over that period than that of people without disabilities. Full-time, year-round employment for people with disabilities generally increased over this period as well. In 2007 and 2008, the full-time, year-round employment levels of people with disabilities began to decline, while those for people without disabilities did not (Crawford, 2012). For employed persons with disabilities, the number of weeks worked in a year dropped from a high of 28.3 weeks in 2006 to 26.8 weeks in 2010. By comparison, for employed people with no disability, the number of weeks worked in a year was unaffected over this period, holding at 39.7 weeks in 2010. Furthermore, the number of hours worked by people with a disability dropped by 2010, reversing the gains made in the period before the most recent recession (Spector, 2012).

There is also a gender dimension to these employment patterns. "From 1999 to 2006, the proportion of men with a disability employed throughout the year grew more (from 48 to 56 percent) than the proportion of men without a disability (73 to 75 percent). For women with a disability, the increase (39 to 46 percent) was slightly more than for women not reporting a disability (61 to 65 percent)" (Garlarneau and Radulescu, 2009, p. 7). In short, some Canadian men and women with disabilities certainly did benefit from economic growth, in terms of an overall increase in the labour participation and employment rates and an accompanying decline in the unemployment rate. Research indicates that the full-time, year-round employment levels for people with disabilities began to decline in 2007 and 2008, but not for people without disabilities (Crawford, 2012).

To summarize these employment trends over the last few decades: in the economic expansion of the late 1990s to about 2006, people with disabilities made notable gains. At the threshold of the major recession and during the Canadian economy's subsequent fragile recovery, the overall gains made by people with disabilities in the labour force were eroded. During the same period, there was no parallel decline in weeks worked in a year for people without disabilities (Spector, 2012).

The disability movement's employment agenda

Like other modern social movements, the Canadian disability movement includes service agencies, overall interest associations, and wider socio-political coalitions with policy agendas that address various concerns and express certain positions on public issues (Prince, 2009; Quarter, 1992; Quarter, Mook, & Armstrong, 2009). As is apparent from the analysis so far presented, employment issues of central concern to the Canadian disability movement are threefold: first, the *disabling* attitudes, built environments, public policies, and professional practices; second, the high proportion of people with disabilities receiving exclusionary day programs or activity services that do not offer employment supports and authentic employment placement options; third, the long-term unemployment and the chronic and pervasive poverty experienced by most adults with disabilities. Disability movement leaders worry that without more sustained and robust public policy actions, the Canadian labour force could well become more exclusionary, not less, driven by technological developments and such practices as outsourcing work, which sees a corresponding decline in common networks of employees. For most working-age adults with disabilities, however, there is a profound refusal to accept structural exclusion as a dismal fact of life.

The employment vision for people with disabilities is captured in the slogan “real work for real pay.” As outlined in Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, this means work on an equal basis with others in the community; work freely chosen or accepted in the labour market; work in open and inclusive settings with reasonable accommodations in the job and/or workplace when and where required. Other international and national documents speak of decent and productive work for everyone in equitable conditions that promote choice, security, and human dignity. That is to say, work that is meaningful to the individual, valued by others, and remunerated at the industry or sector standard; work where employees with disabilities enjoy the same rights as other employees and are equally protected by legislated employment and safety standards.

For many Canadians with disabilities and their allies, gainful employment is regarded as an essential part of economic and social citizenship with its attendant rights and responsibilities, including the right to take responsible risks. Of course an earned income is a cherished result, but employment for people with disabilities, as for other Canadians, is about more than getting a paycheque. At its best, the workplace is viewed as a site of making contributions, having a routine, and connecting with other people, combined with experiencing a sense of belonging and positive sense of self. The workplace can also be a place of learning and of teaching others about issues of disability and, as a result, about shifting attitudes and reformulating relationships (Canada, 2013; Church, Frazee, Panitch, Luciani, & Bowman, 2007).

For the disability movement in Canada, the workplace is a target of politicization; an arena for contesting the pattern of prevailing employment practices and the relative absence of other preferred employment options. Disability activists and supporters are critical of volunteer placements and unpaid work experiences counting as employment in provincial government labour programs; they are also critical of the continued reliance on sheltered workshops and work enclaves, and of the underinvestment in supported employment measures (McCreath, 2011; Wilton, 2006). Employment options preferred by the disability movement include so-called open or competitive employment in the market economy, customized employment, supported employment, and self-employment (Canadian Association of Community Living, 2012; Institute for Research and Development on Inclusion and Society, 2013). Supported employment is paid and meaningful work in the labour market obtained and maintained with appropriate supports, such as equipment or job coaching assistance.

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Social economy organizations, broadly understood, also provide positive employment opportunities for people with disabilities. "Removing Barriers to Work," a study by Marcy Cohen, Michael Goldberg, Nick Istvanffy, Tim Stainton, Adrienne Wasik, and Karen-Marie Woods (2008), provides insights into seven social enterprises in BC that employ people with disabilities. Three of the social enterprises employ people with mental illnesses, that is, mental health consumers; two enterprises employ people with developmental disabilities; and two employ a mixed disability population, largely people with undiagnosed mental illness and Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD). The oldest of these social enterprises was established in 1990, while the others were formed between 2001 and 2005. Cohen and her associates found that, "most were founded by small groups of dedicated individuals who were determined to move beyond service provision to a social enterprise business model in order to provide paid employment to their clients" (2008, p. 35).³ Most of the employees work part-time and in 2006 earned \$8 to \$10 per hour. The nature of these businesses include lawn and property maintenance; demolition and snow removal; a café, catering, and contract meals; flyer collation for a local newspaper; and janitorial services. Most of the enterprises are affiliated with a larger organization, such as a local foundation, community services society, or a disability or mental health association. These affiliates provide support with human resources and counselling services for employees. The study frankly notes a limitation of the social enterprise sector in the employment of people with disabilities: "The stated social purpose of some social enterprises may be the generation of revenue for social programming provided by an affiliated agency or organization. These social enterprises are more likely to employ workers from the mainstream labour market who can work full-time, full-year and who do not require significant accommodations or social supports due to a disability" (Cohen et al, 2008, p. 60).

Employment policy reform approaches divide into two broad types: *distributional improvements* and *structural innovations*. Distributional improvements are about increasing labour force participation rates, augmenting training opportunities, and improving the wage levels and occupational benefits for workers. A number of the social enterprises examined by Cohen (2008) represent this approach, offering employment opportunities for seven to 57 people with disabilities, along with general manager and site supervisor roles. In comparison, structural innovations are about changing prevailing beliefs about and attitudes toward people with disabilities and their work capacity, in addition to constructing accessible and inclusive workplaces in the mainstream and social economies. Within the mental health recovery and psychiatric survivor movement, social economy organizations administered by individuals who consume mental health services, consumer-run organizations in other words, are examples of structural innovation creating spaces of democratic engagement and solidarity (Shragge & Church, 1998).

In a submission to a federal parliamentary committee, the CCD advances an employment agenda that encompass both distributional and structural reform ideas (Council of Canadians with Disabilities, 2013). The CCD recommends as a priority that new government investments be directed at youth with disabilities, those between 18 to 30 years of age, in transitions from school to work. In addition, for people with more complex needs, for example those with multiple and very severe disabilities, a range of longer-term supports must be provided. The CCD further recommends that the federal government lead by example as a model employer, which would include ensuring appropriate accommodations are in place for people with disabilities; taking more action with respect to human rights complaints; and considering affirmative action measures, such as wage subsidies and tax credits for employers in order to create stronger employment incentives for hiring and retaining workers with disabilities. The message here is that any employment strategy for people with disabilities must focus not only on expanding participation in the mainstream labour force but also enhancing innovation in workplace cultures and practices.

RECENT POLICY THINKING ON CANADA'S AGING POPULATION, THE LABOUR FORCE, AND DISABILITY

Canada's population is aging; it will continue to do so for the next several decades and will soon accelerate. This demographic trend means a number of things for the general issue of people with disability, as well as particular issue of people with disability participating in the labour force. There is the haunting question in the minds of aging parents of fully-grown children with an intellectual disability, a severe physical impairment, or who are deemed medically fragile: who will care for our children? There is the epidemiological reality that with age, the prevalence and severity of disability rises. As the population ages, the working-age share of the population will shrink. An aging work force, in addition, likely means the number of people that become disabled while working will increase. This raises questions about job retention—staying at work following the onset of impairment or a condition—and questions about job re-entry—returning to work after a disability-related absence. What is recent policy thinking at the national level on these sorts of issues?

A federal government report, "Economic and Fiscal Implications of Canada's Aging Population," states that according to projections by the federal government, the overall labour force participation rate has already peaked and will decline over the next thirty years (Canada, 2012). This report is primarily a macro-level economic analysis on issues of productivity and public finances, though with some traces of social policy considerations. Labour shortages are predicted to occur most likely in varied ways in different sectors and locations and at different times. However, shortages may specifically develop, and policy analysts see people with disabilities as a significant unrealized pool of workers for the Canadian economy. This report recognizes that increasing the workforce participation of these underrepresented groups has the capability to boost Canada's labour force growth in the coming years (Canada, 2012). This report acknowledges that there is room for improving Canada's workforce participation rate and that government can play an important role, especially for groups underrepresented in the labour force, through programs that support skills development and training. While it is assumed that most of this labour force growth will take place in the market economy, the social economy can make a contribution although, in the current policy orientation of the Harper government, it is uncertain how significant a role.

In a similar fashion, another federal government study, "Rethinking disAbility in the Private Sector," observes that despite an aging population and impending labour shortage, the talent pool of people with disabilities is being ignored (Canada, 2013). This report, crafted by a panel of four representatives from business and non-governmental organizations, was directed at Canadian private-sector employers. The report points out that there are about 795,000 working-aged people with disabilities who are not working and who want to work, and that of these people, 340,000 have some level of post-secondary education. The report makes a business case—perhaps the most explicit to date by the federal government—for employing people with disabilities. Benefits identified for business firms include an educated and talented group of workers; improved company culture and reputation among the public; greater employee loyalty and commitment; lower turnover rates, thus reducing costs of training new employees; and more effective marketing to customer demographics of people with disabilities. That employers are not already doing this on a widespread scale, is an indication of present challenges and shows that attitudinal changes are still required. It also suggests that legislated change may be required to break through these barriers.

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In “Rethinking disAbility in the Private Sector,” mention is made of social enterprises and nonprofits, not as employers, however, but rather as community partners in helping Canadian businesses plan for hiring people with disabilities. This approach reflects the fact that in most communities in Canada there is no single agency at the local level to assist employers in navigating employment service provider systems. There tend to be multiple disability groups and agencies in urban communities, which certainly present a complex and fragmented landscape. Consequently, private-sector employers do not have a good idea of who to contact or where to send job postings if they wanted to recruit from a pool of qualified people with disabilities. At times, huge gaps exist between what employers expect from an applicant and what a person with a disability can do on the job, particularly if there are not supports readily available at the workplace.⁴

Federal government measures on disability and employment

So far, this discussion on policy thinking has looked at two reports as illustrations of the ideas and analyses being expressed by the federal government in regards to Canada’s aging population, labour force, and disability. We now turn to recent federal government initiatives announced by the Harper government, specifically a set of measures relating to people with disabilities and employment. On a suggestion coming from the “Rethinking disAbility in the Private Sector” report, the Harper government affirmed in the 2013 federal budget a one-time investment of \$2 million to support the creation of a Canadian Employers Disability Forum “to bring greater private sector attention to the employment needs of Canadians with disabilities.” Also in the 2013 budget, the government stated that: 1) \$7 million is earmarked for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for research on disability and work; 2) the Enabling Accessibility Fund to improve the physical accessibility of community facilities is to become an ongoing program of \$15 million per year as of 2013–2014; and 3) the Opportunities Fund, an employment preparation program for people not eligible for services funded under the Employment Insurance system, is also to be an ongoing program with \$40 million per year as of 2015–2016. The government indicated that the program design of the Opportunities Fund will be adjusted to provide more demand-driven training service in order to be more responsive to local labour market needs.⁵ A real challenge facing disability organizations and others in the social economy and voluntary sector of Canada, however, is their capacity to deliver innovative labour market programs. As Mario Levesque (2012) shows in a study of Canadian disability organizations in five provinces between 2005–2010, these organizations often lack the human, financial, and technological resources, and, most crucially, the core operating funds to undertake innovative employment programming.

Furthermore, in 2014–2015 the Harper government is introducing a new set of Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities, a cost-shared program of approximately \$222 million per year with the provinces. With no new federal money added to the agreement, the Harper government’s stated aim to better ensure that the employment needs of businesses are met under these intergovernmental agreements seems problematic, especially in view of a history of funding constraints (Graefe & Levesque, 2010). The 2014 federal budget announced a few targeted and modest measures on employment for certain categories of people with disabilities; specifically, \$11.4 million over four years to support job training for people with autism spectrum disorder, and \$15 million over three years for initiatives to connect employers with youth and working-age adults with developmental disabilities. These measures indicate a modicum of political will exercised by federal policy makers, a robust vision of full participation for all Canadians with disabilities is still absent (Levesque & Graefe, 2013).

In these federal reports and in other studies (Askari, Bartlett, Cameron, & Lao, 2013; Ramlo & Berlin, 2006) we see evidence of demographic aging as a “guiding paradigm” in the thinking of Canadian public policy advisors

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and decision makers (McDaniel, 1987). More than that, demographic aging is framed in large part as a threat, with projected dangers of labour market shortages, diminished productivity, and increased burdens on public finances. At the same time, people with disabilities and other groups underrepresented in the workforce (Aboriginal peoples, youth, and new immigrants) are identified as an untapped pool of human resources for the market economy. In recent measures by the Harper government, the stated goals are a mix of general ideas and specific aims, and the definition of the issue of employment for people with disabilities emphasizes the demand-side of the economy, addressing the needs of businesses and the immediate requirements of the competitive labour market. (A supply-side approach to labour market policy tends to focus on the long-term unemployed, and targeting assistance on disadvantaged groups by investing in their employability and drawing on community-based resources as well as business firms.) The policy instruments deployed by the Harper Conservatives through the Canadian Employers Disability Forum are mainly procedural in nature, and involve minimal incremental spending commitments. In sum, these initiatives by the federal government only address the goals of the disability community in Canada to a very modest extent.

A WINDOW OF OPPORTUNITY FOR THE SOCIAL ECONOMY

Nonprofits, social enterprises, and other third-sector organizations are of great consequence in the lives of many Canadians with disabilities, supporting them materially through the provision of vital goods and services, enabling social connections, and promoting a measure of well-being in rural and urban communities across provinces (Friesen, Alasia, & Bollam, 2010; Rice & Prince, 2013; Vaillancourt & Tremblay, 2002). Some nonprofits and social enterprises are also important places of employment for people with disabilities (Cohen et al., 2008; Lee, 2013; Mader & Conn, 2003; IRIS 2013). However, it must be conceded that many nonprofits, charities, and community service agencies reproduce paternalistic and medical models of disability, limiting a human rights discourse and an agenda of equality and full citizenship for people with disabilities (Lord & Hutchison, 2007; McCreath, 2011; Prince, 2009; Wilton, 2006). In any case, there is good reason to look at the social economy as a site for greater employment opportunities for disabled Canadians.

In the context of recent policy reports on the Canadian labour force and disability, along with program funding announcements by the Harper government, there appears to be a window of opportunity for the social economy. To be precise, there appear to be openings for nonprofits and social enterprises to participate in various ways and at various levels in the design and delivery of the new Canadian Employers Disability Forum, the Enabling Accessibility Fund, the Opportunities Fund, the SSHRC funding for research related to the labour market participation of people with disabilities, and possibly the new generation of Labour Market Agreements for Persons with Disabilities. Opportunities for third-sector engagement in this sector of policy and governance could be in both the co-construction of policy and in the co-production of programs and services. Questions of strategy for disability organizations and for social economy organizations therefore arise: How to shape issue definitions? Which proposals to put forward to gain the attention of policy makers? Where to focus time and energy, and how to decide which issues to focus on? Such questions offer a space of shared interests and a potential coalition-building opportunity for disability and social economy researchers and practitioners.

The case for social economy organizations employing people with disabilities can be made on several grounds or types of logic. These include growing the economy; promoting progressive cultural change and policy learning and diffusion; and building social capital. The economic argument, which is the line of reasoning in the federal reports discussed earlier in this article, relates to expanding the employment opportunities for underrepresented groups in the labour market. The intended outcomes are to boost the incomes of Canadians with disabilities and to improve productivity growth of the market economy. There is no reason that this basic

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argument cannot be extended to refer to social enterprises and other social economy organizations that engage in the production and exchange of goods and services. Our thinking on employment for people with disabilities must extend beyond the conventional opportunities in the competitive market—which do not offer adequate accommodations and supports—and the segregated sector of sheltered workshops and job enclaves. Consumer-run businesses, community-based nonprofits, and local social firms are places where people can develop their human capacities and function as co-operative producers of the material means of life (Macpherson, 1985; Mook, Quarter & Ryan, 2010; Vaillancourt & Tremblay, 2002).

Other arguments for social economy organizations employing people with disabilities include the critical task of dispelling myths and unwarranted concerns about the limitations and risks of hiring persons with a disability, at root, ableism. Elsewhere, I have written on the prevailing sentiment in Canada on disability as one of ambivalence, with an odd mixture of positive and negative attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, experiences, and behaviours.

At a systemic or personal level, ableism can encompass silencing, segregation or exclusion, marginalization, denial, neglect, violence and abuse, and poverty based on one or more disability. Power, prestige, and privilege in society—all features central to social stratification, are distributed based on prevailing notions of ability and normalcy, thus downgrading the status of persons with disabilities. (Prince, 2009, pp. 70–71)

Social economy organizations usefully participate in the project of enabling citizenship when they deconstruct the dominant image of the “disabled person” as someone with a visible, long-term physical impairment, and they pluralize the image with the realities of diverse forms of disablements and capacities. Employment in forward-thinking social enterprises offers skills development, on-the-job training, mentorship, and perhaps employment assistance and counselling (Lee, 2013; Mader & Conn, 2003). Such activities undoubtedly contribute to social capital, as well as human capital, through the forging of ties and networks of trust and support. Nurtured are the core human values of “self-respect, being esteemed by one’s fellows, having some control over one’s own life and choices, and the sense of belonging to some community with a shared sense of value” (Macpherson, 1985, p. 50). As Eric Shragge and Kathryn Church have observed of community economic development practices in Montreal and Toronto: “Community businesses are a site for learning, participation, and solidarity. Employees acquire new skills, broader interests, and coping strategies. They act as decision-makers in business management and become connected to a social movement. Many were moving for the first time from virtual isolation into positive association with others who shared their life experience” (1998, p. 42).

Among networks of nonprofits, community-based agencies, and co-operatives, policy and practice learning on employment can be encouraged. To ensure that social economy organizations are an advance over sheltered workshops, and do not become another form of enclave employment for some people with disabilities, certain questions need to be fairly debated and openly addressed. At a local level, what do the activities of individual nonprofits say about disability? Do their actions provide inclusive spaces and positive images around disability and diversity, or reproduce traditional attitudes and barriers? At the sectoral level, what is the responsibility of the social economy as a sector for fostering the access, participation, and human rights of people with disabilities? Information and experiences on issues, solutions, and the results of hiring and retaining people with a disability can be shared, along with lessons and promising practices. More systematic policy learning and knowledge transfer can occur by applying a disability access and inclusion lens (Prince, 2009) to the operations of social economy organizations. A disability lens prompts several questions: How accessible is the workplace of a nonprofit, for example, physically and attitudinally? Is there a policy on inclusive practices concerning

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accessibility, disability, and equity and, if so, on what matters? How do such policies actually work and are they monitored to ensure effective implementation? Are there organizational processes in place for regular reviews and discussions on these policies and practices? At the provincial or national level or in a given sector of the social economy, what mechanisms and processes are in place, or might be envisaged to be established, to foster the adoption of effective inclusive practices for employment and other aspects of governance?

CONCLUSION

This article has argued for the idea that social economy sector organizations can become a more significant pathway to gainful employment for many Canadians with disabilities. A preliminary exploration has been made of the relationship of people with disabilities to the labour market and the social economy. In today's world of work, there are several labour markets for people with disabilities (and other disadvantaged groups in Canada); some are more accessible and desirable than others. Those labour markets most available are often less than desirable, and those most preferred are often the least available, especially to people with severe disabilities. Compared to Canadians without disabilities, we know that Canadians with disabilities are less likely to be employed, less likely to work full-time or to work year-round; and that Canadians with disabilities are more likely to have lower pay and fewer promotions, and are more likely to experience discrimination at work and to live in lower-income households. Evidence presented indicates that gains made by Canadians with disabilities in the labour market outcomes in the 1990s and early 2000s were largely lost due to the 2008–2009 economic recession.

Employment in today's capitalist market economy is not possible for all persons with disabilities, nor is it necessarily the labour market of choice for many people with or without disability.⁶ This article has shown that the Canadian disability movement has preferences for certain work environments and misgivings about others. The 165,000 or more nonprofits and other social economy organizations in Canada represent an important employment option for many people living with disabilities. In recent public policy reports and disability policy announcements by the Harper government, the social economy is insufficiently recognized as a valuable sector or partner (Rice & Prince, 2013). Nonetheless, links between social economy research and activities and disability studies and advocacy can be strengthened to mobilize on shared interests and reform ideas. Nonprofits, co-operatives, and social enterprises are one option along a spectrum of strategies for enhancing the labour force participation of Canadians with disabilities.

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NOTES

1. My involvement in the Canadian disability community is largely with the community living movement and the disability rights movement, along with participation in academic programs and research institutes in

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universities. I do include “mental illness” and the mad movement as part of “disability.” For research available from that community see LeFrançois, Menzies, & Reaume (2013). The term “mad studies,” “embrace[s] the body of knowledge that has emerged from psychiatric survivors, Mad-identified people, antipsychiatry academic sand activists, critical psychiatrists, and radial therapists” (LeFrançois, Menzies, & Reaume, 2013, p. 337). This growing and reclaimed body of knowledge “is critical of the mental health system” while generally approving of the psychiatric survivor and mental health consumer movements.

2. In this article, when discussing disability in Canada, we are usually talking about people who have self-identified as such in a Statistics Canada survey (2008). The main source used here is the Participation and Activity Limitation Survey, which was conducted after the census in 2006.
3. Community businesses may follow similar patterns of formation. Shragge and Church describe psychiatric survivor-run community economic development entities as follows: “Community businesses are started very simply, by getting a few people together to learn about each other’s skills and generate ideas. Development proceeds through practical problem-solving; organizational structures are sufficiently flexible to accommodate employee needs. Survivor-run businesses make use of peer rather than professional training and skills development. ... Participatory management is a key feature, accomplished through board membership (at least 50%) and affirmative hiring” (1998, p. 40).
4. These remarks are based on confidential interviews and conversations, as well as on participant observations.
5. The Opportunities Fund does have limitations. While important, the monies are very small. Any projects funded need to include at least three provinces, which largely negates applications from smaller groups in a single province. Moreover, the criteria for its focus on innovative projects means that renewed funding for the same project is not possible, which is difficult for persons with disabilities given that their programs are not mainstream to begin with. I thank one of the reviewers for this insight.
6. Shragge and Church conclude: “Community economic development by itself cannot replace macro-economic and fiscal policies as tools to address the crisis of jobs and poverty” (1998, p. 43). They are optimistic, though, that economic development can be redefined “as a public rather than a private process—one in which the community sector should have a voice.” Since making this observation both Shragge and Church have made significant contributions to the study of community economic development in numerous publications. Gainful employment of whatever kind is not the full or universal solution, certainly for people with severe, multiple, and complex impairments. Other forms of belonging and contribution must be nurtured. Policy actions on income benefits and personal supports, among other measures, are critical for reducing the disproportionate poverty of Canadians with disabilities (Prince, 2009).

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