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## Book Review

by Diana Smith

**Researching the Social Economy.** Edited by Laurie Mook, Jack Quarter, and Sherida Ryan. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press. Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press. Québec. 2008. 320 pp. ISBN 9780802099532.

*Researching the Social Economy* is a collection of original essays on the emerging concept of “social economy” in Canada. In 2005, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded a five-year regional and national social economy research program. This sparked a multitude of initiatives and actions across Canada, including those chronicled in this collection from the Southern Ontario Node of the Social Economy Research Hub. In their own work, the editors, Mook, Quarter, and Ryan, build on the foundation of their model of the social economy, elaborated on in their 2009 publication, *Understanding the Social Economy*, but the text as a whole is more than that. *Researching the Social Economy* is a series of essays that are a combination of reviews, conceptual analyses, and action research in various contexts. As the authors suggest, and I concur, this is the beginning of a much-needed Canadian research focus on the social economy and civil society in all of its complexity and richness. This book will be of interest to scholars, students, practitioners, and planners who are seeking creative and innovative perspectives to address challenging social and economic issues. The collection is diverse and the scope vast, but the interrelationship between each essay is largely left unexplored, resulting in a somewhat fragmented whole. Nevertheless, it makes a significant contribution to the body of inquiry and research.

The social economy is a contested space and concept, emergent and varied in its conceptual and theoretical definitions, as is addressed in the introductory chapter by the authors. In fact, the first six chapters of the book provide a contextual and comparative analysis of the complexity of the social economy in Canada (focused on Ontario and Quebec) and Europe.

The remainder of the book highlights specific action research projects that explore the efficacy and relevance of the social economy. The foci are diverse, ranging from climate change, the online social economy, work stoppages, organic farming, and corporate volunteerism. I am sure there are many ways to view this text's arguments, but I view community as the primary conceptual framework. I struggle with “economy” as the overriding context as suggested by the concept of social economy. What is the “civil society” in a social economy context? The framing of the social economy seems to provide only partial recognition of the research on sustainability, corporate social responsibility, social movements, social innovation, nonprofit studies, volunteerism, and public policy relating to citizen engagement, the democratic deficit, and social inclusion.

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The individual initiatives (action research – case/issue specific in the second half of the book) warrant their own review. Seen as a collection, they raise a number of questions for further investigation and dialogue. So do the common themes: the need for innovation/stability in financing and leadership, emerging organizational forms, capacity development, legitimacy, and recognition. They raise for me two key questions:

- Can diverse topics such as online approaches, corporate volunteerism, organic farming, climate change initiatives, high school community service, and reaching immigrant populations be viewed as contributing to a “whole”? Are they scalable?
- How does social economy research link to the fields of community development, citizen engagement, capacity development, social movements, democratic reform, and sustainability?

While they do not answer these questions directly, Mook, Quarter, and Ryan conceptualize the social economy as a paradigm that aligns social good and private value in institutional forms (non-profits and cooperatives) and value-based practices to foster social inclusion, economic well-being, and progressive change in society. The book succeeds in raising the level of discourse about the social economy sector, a huge gap in the public policy, academic, and capacity-building context. Mapping of the territory and the accompanying analysis are an important contribution to the theoretical frameworks for understanding and evaluating the social economy as both a definitional and conceptual framework. While underdeveloped, these frameworks may in the end provide the key to answering the above questions. In any event, the focus on recognizing and exploring the interrelationship between the public and private spheres is a strength and a significant contribution to social economy scholarship.

Another key contribution of the book lies in its forefronting of the role of government in relation to the social economy, which is addressed from varied perspectives. This contribution is also one of the limitations of the book as the focus is on the provincial level (and only Quebec and Ontario), likely an outcome of the original mandate. Notable among the provincial foci is the way in which Mendell and Neamtam ably highlight the distinct society in Quebec, the roots of the social norms, political culture, and public policy interventions to support a social economy. However, one wonders about the applicability of this example, as other parts of the country do not share many of the same roots and traditions. There are significant regional distinctions throughout Canada that warrant further research and inquiry and there is only passing reference to the significance of federal policy in areas such as charitable status, laws governing finance, access to stable funding, research and development, and the impact of a neo-conservative agenda. The role of local and regional government is absent, a contradiction for much of the community development literature and practice which could otherwise be seen to be part of the social economy tradition.

A final, if more minor, issue is the fact that this collection of research on the social economy pays too little attention to the environmental sector (with the exception of the case studies on climate change and organic farming) in my opinion. Environmental organizations, the environmental movement, sustainable development, etc., have much to contribute from the perspective of an ecological mindset, whole systems perspectives, and the experience of straddling the public/private/non-profit “silos.” The environment, along with the social economy, is the third leg in the sustainability “stool” and should be forefronted more than it is in the literature.

*Researching the Social Economy* provides much food for thought, and, for me, raises as many questions as it provides answers. I was excited, challenged, and frustrated by the diversity that the text presented.

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Specifically, I was excited by the possibilities of reframing community innovation and change in the social economy context. I was challenged and frustrated by the lack of synthesis and integration within the text as a whole. In the end, I was left wrestling with questions such as:

- How does the social economy connect to social inclusion? Canada is diverse, its regions and communities varied. There are important challenges for particular groups including issues surrounding immigrants, the urban/ rural split and indigenous peoples that are not addressed in this text.
- How do community and economy relate to and engage with each other?
- What are the emerging approaches to governance that will support change?
- How do the conceptual frames of the social economy reconcile varied roles in society? For example: the consumer, the client, the worker and the citizen?
- Where is the public discourse likely to occur? Kitchen tables? Downtown urban neighbourhoods? A picket line? A community centre? A job site? A corporate boardroom?

In the end, perhaps the greatest contribution of this text is that it raises these questions and opens up a space for dialogue on these and other issues through its diversity. *Researching the Social Economy* contributes to the field of inquiry and discourse about the society we want, and the means by which we will realize the collective vision for the future.

### About the author / L'auteur

Diana Smith, Adjunct Professor, University of Victoria and EcoSol Consulting Inc., BC, Canada.  
Email: [Diana@ecosolcan.com](mailto:Diana@ecosolcan.com)