

Understanding Co-operatives Through Research

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Importance of Research

Author Robin Murray states in his review² of the recently released book, *Humanizing the Economy: Co-operatives in the Age of Capital*³:

“There are many signs that there is a turn in the *Zeitgeist* toward co-operation...In many ways practice has advanced faster than theory. There is an explosion of social economic initiatives, but much less research on their common patterns and characteristics. If the tide is turning in favor of co-operation, is the co-operative movement prepared? It needs the same deep research on the factors for institutional success that Elinor Ostrom and her colleagues have devoted to the management of the commons. It [the co-operative movement] needs the further articulation of the co-operative idea in the Information Age. And it requires the elaboration of the institutional infrastructure – schools, colleges, banks, think tanks, innovation labs, information networks, ethical marks, and currencies – in other words, the economic soil which allows co-operatives to flourish.”

These comments by Robin Murray, best known for his contribution *Co-operation in the Age of Google*, suggest that there are a number of gaps in the knowledge now possessed by the co-operative research community and co-operative leaders. He further suggests that the research community has a responsibility to bridge these gaps. My paper will describe strategies that have proven successful in building collaborative research relationships between co-operative organizations and academics with the goal of bridging these gaps. My focus is primarily Canada, but I will also speak to the role that the International Co-operative Alliance Committee on Co-operative Research can play on an international level.

Role the Academy Can Play

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² ‘A Co-operative Idea for the 21st Century’, A review of John Restakis’s *Humanizing the Economy: Co-operatives in the Age of Capital*, by Robin Murray. *i4*, March 25 2011, communityrenewal.ca/.

³ *Humanizing the Economy: Co-operatives in the Age of Capital*, John Restakis, New Society Publishers, 2011.

Academic researchers have important contributions to make toward the understanding of co-operatives through the research they conduct. To appreciate these potential contributions and where they can best be made, however, it is important to distinguish among the various types of research that is conducted.

Conceptual Research

Conceptual research is what is most often expected of the academy. Such research is theoretical and abstract, rooted in a conceptual framework used to outline possible courses of action or to present a preferred approach to an idea or thought.

Conceptual - or theoretical frameworks - attempt to connect to all aspects of inquiry - problem definition, purpose, literature review, methodology, data collection and analysis.

The outcome of conceptual research is perhaps what has contributed to the label, "ivory tower" when many people talk about the work of the academic in a university setting. Because of its theoretical nature, the research outcome is often considered to be impractical and removed from the realities of every day life, seldom providing useful answers to the concerns of the co-operative community.

It is critical to understand, however, that theoretical research is fundamental to the in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon under study. To build a body of knowledge, research must be replicable over time, and capable of being generalized across a wide variety of settings and contexts. To have confidence in the results there is a need to be able to predict with some certainty that what has been observed is true not only of the institution under study, but in every circumstance.

Conceptual research alone, however, is not sufficient to serve the needs of co-operatives organizations.

Applied Research

Applied research, often lead by researchers within co-operative organizations, may - and ideally - should begin with a conceptual framework to set out results of previous, similar research and to suggest ways in which the issue under review might be successfully studied. The method of inquiry chosen should also be conducted with the same degree of rigour and concern for sound research methodology as conceptual research. Ultimately, however, applied research will focus on the short or long term concerns of an organization. The value of the research outcome to the organization should be immediately recognizable.

Applied research is sometimes criticized within academia for its narrow focus on a particular organization; the research is less likely to be repeated or the results generalizable across a large number of settings. The outcomes of such research are considered to be of greater value to the co-operative community, and because of its specificity, of lesser value to the academic.

In some cases an academic “partners” with the community organization but only on this one project; a single project in isolation from others is not sufficient to build a “theory “ of co-operatives. Within academia such research may be considered to be consulting or practise of professional skills, not research.

Community-Engaged Research

Community-engaged research (also referred to as community-based research) is gaining greater acceptance among academics and sector members alike. This model of research is built upon an ongoing partnership between the academic and the practitioner, often with many practitioners in similar organizations. What sets this approach to research apart is the premise that the research method involves co-construction of the research question, the choice of research method, data collection, analysis and interpretation. The researcher is not an objective observer of the organization as object. The organizational leaders are as active in the research design and conduct as the academic.

The outcome of this model and this approach to research is results that are of benefit to both academic and co-operative. The problem can be framed in such a way as to have academic rigor, theoretical and practical value. The model supports both applied and conceptual research – conceptual research disseminated in ways, which have relevance, research questions driven by co-op partner needs, but framed in longer-term context so as to add to building a body of knowledge.

Strategies for Conducting Co-operative Research in Canada

Until the mid 1980’s most large co-operative organizations in Canada hired their own research staff and had fairly extensive libraries of their own. Research was specific to the decision-making needs of the co-operative but also had a strong policy orientation. This is no longer the case as one by one the research departments and have libraries closed.⁴ Today there are four research institutes in Canada whose work focusses specifically on co-operatives, as well as four research chairs, each receiving funds in varying proportions from francophone and/or anglophone co-operatives. I will describe the approach and research focus of the one with which I am most familiar, the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives located at the *University of Saskatchewan in Western Canada*.

The Centre for the study of Co-operatives, University of Saskatchewan

The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives is an interdisciplinary teaching and research institution located on the University of Saskatchewan campus in Saskatoon. We are part of an international network of similar centres and organizations. Founded in 1984, we are the largest centre of this type in Anglophone Canada, the

⁴ Credit Union Central of Canada and Federated Co-operatives Limited have both recently established in house research capacity. It is too early to conclude that the sector is once more moving in this direction.

most research-oriented in North America, and one of the most interdisciplinary in the world.

Our purpose as university researchers and academics is to support university-level and university-based research, teaching, and outreach related to co-operatives; in doing this, we foster mutually enriching interaction between the university community and the co-operative sector. The work of our Centre is driven by a mandate that envisions a future in which people are empowered through co-operatives—among other solutions—to develop an economy and society that are democratic, participatory, responsive, creative, diverse, productive, and sustainable.

Conceptual research is broadly applicable to many different kinds of co-operatives and to the strategic decisions and issues they face; at the same time, it is an area of fundamental interest for researchers and students who seek to understand the world. Through the conceptual research we conduct at the Centre for the study of Co-operatives, we aim to bring together the academic and co-operative sectors.

Co-operatives embody values that are attractive to many people, and interesting for academic study. As microcosms of society, co-ops show the intersection of political and economic affairs. They are rich and instructive examples of complex organization. But we study them not only in abstract theory: co-ops also need to be studied in their contemporary contexts and in relation to social and economic needs, in Saskatchewan and elsewhere.

Our goal is to conduct *grounded* research that involves mutual exchange, ideas that are of interest and benefit to researchers and learners both within and outside of universities. As such we strive to be a leading centre for *community-engaged research*.

Our interests, and that of co-operatives as an area of inquiry, also require us to be *interdisciplinary*, and we enthusiastically embrace this direction. We see the Centre for the study of Co-operatives as a leading example of organizational innovation, one of a growing number of university research centres around the world. A key part of our strategy is to create linkages among groups of researchers and learners in different fields and disciplines, with co-operatives as our common thread. We have used this model very effectively in bringing together some 50 community partners and 25 academics to study the social economy.

Our strategic focus on co-operatives leads us into connected themes and areas. These include community economic development, social economy, community and social cohesion, the study of organizational innovations, institutional governance, the new economy, the role of social movements in economic change, sustainable development, and empowerment.

The Centre undertakes research about co-operatives and the political, social, and economic aspects relating to them. Our largest current project — Linking, Learning,

Leveraging: Social Enterprises, Knowledgeable Economies, and Sustainable Communities — is investigating how social economy enterprises, including co-operatives, not-for-profits, and other community-based organizations, build stronger and more entrepreneurial communities. The project involves partnerships between university researchers and a broad spectrum of more than twenty-five community enterprises whose goals and activities contribute to the foundation of the regional economy and its sustained growth and development. Student employment and training are also integral to this project. To date, forty-eight students have benefited from project funding with scholarships, internships, and other stipends. Many of the internships have involved co-op development work across Northern Ontario, Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

Other current research topics include:

- Co-operative Financing Models for Aboriginal Economic Development
- Co-operative Marketing Options for Organic Agriculture
- Co-ordination, Identity, and Success in a Federated Marketing System: Retail Co-operatives in Western Canada
- Assessing the Effectiveness of Social Enterprise Governance Models
- Examining Co-operative Conversions
- Evaluating the Impact of Credit Union Community Loans Programs
- Evaluating Quality of Care: A Comparison of Non-profit, Co-operative, and For-profit Child Care

The Centre for the Study of Co-operatives has a long history of working closely with the established co-operative sector, conducting research to facilitate decision making by elected leadership and management. More recently our research has focused on the emerging co-operative sector, and more broadly in communities where co-operatives are not extensively represented. In addition to generating information for co-operative managers and decision makers, much of the research we do informs policymakers at the local, provincial, and national level.

National Initiatives

The co-operative sector in Canada also has a long history of sector organizations working in partnership with academics to conduct research of relevance to both parties. Representatives from the federal government and national co-operative organizations, francophone and anglophone, have been active participants in the Canadian Association for Studies in Co-operation, the national association of English speaking co-operative researchers, as well as CIRIEC Canada, the French counterpart, since their inception over 25 years ago. Annual meetings and associated publications provide a venue for discussion and sharing of contemporary research results.

Starting in the late 1990s a new model for conducting research began to emerge with the assistance of funding from Canada's national funding agency for the social sciences, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). This model,

officially called a Community-University Research Alliance (CURA), was intended to refocus the emphasis from theoretical research with limited immediate value to the non-university audience, to community-focused, partnership-based research.

In 2000 the Centre for the Study of Co-operatives obtained SSHRC funding to pursue the largest of its day, national study on co-operatives. With government and co-op sector partners involved in research design, data collection and dissemination, it was the first in a series of large initiatives employing a community-engaged research model. Seven federally funded, large-scale CURA projects examining the social economy in Canada followed (2005 – 2010), entrenching the collaborative model of research more firmly in the Canadian research landscape. In each of these instances, the leading institution was a university, with co-operatives involved as active partners. In 2009 in Quebec, then 2010 nationally, co-operative organizations were successful in obtaining CURA funds, this time with the co-operative organization being the lead institution, working in partnership with academics across the country.

These most recently funded initiatives are the largest projects to-date conducting research specifically on co-operatives. Développement Territorial et Coopération (2009-2014) is partnered with five Quebec universities, a francophone university in New Brunswick, co-op development and municipal organizations, and lead by Conseil Québécois de la Coopération et de la Mutualité. *Measuring the Co-operative Difference Research Network* (2010-2015) involves four universities located in the Atlantic region, central Canada, the Prairies and the West Coast of Canada, co-operatives across Canada, lead by the Canadian Co-operative Association. These partnerships are changing the face of co-operative research in Canada, laying the groundwork for both rigorous and grounded research results.

It is worthy of note that funding and methodological room is still there for independent, theoretical research for those who prefer it.

Developing a National Research Agenda

In 2009 the federal department responsible for co-operative development in Canada, the Rural and Co-operatives Secretariat, initiated an effort to develop and move forward a national research agenda for co-operatives. This process is lead by a recently formed National Steering Committee comprised of representatives from academia, national and provincial co-operative associations, and the federal government. The steering committee is gathering information on co-operative research past, present and ongoing, and collecting input to set priorities for a national agenda.

At the same time, the Rural and Co-operatives Secretariat has secured funding to support co-operative development and research initiatives across the country. It is anticipated that the work of the committee will feed into the design of funding programs going forward. It is also recognized that the work of academics must also remain independent as much as possible from agenda's designed by industry.

A recent survey revealed some of the following research priorities as identified by co-operative researchers and decision-makers across the country, appearing in no particular order:

- Organizational democracy, social and economic impacts of co-operatives, strategic planning for strengthening the co-operative difference, sustainability reporting
- Looking at how new forms of co-ops (mainly, co-ops that provide services to households and families) perform compared to other organizational forms
- Governance, theory, organizational effectiveness, women's co-ops, leadership
- New types of emerging co-ops with a multi-stakeholder focus, youth engagement in the co-operative movement, comparing the financial performance of co-ops to that of the private sector
- Public policy, the capitalization of co-ops, the socio-economic impact of co-ops, youth engagement
- Co-ops as a tool for creating sustainable communities and economic development
- Youth engagement in the sector, organizational partnerships to facilitate development in rural communities, collective approaches to micro-business development using peer group models, the co-op model as a tool for business succession
- Law, agriculture policy, social and economic policy, sustainable development, history of co-ops, governance and management, social justice

International Perspective on Research: Role that the ICA Committee on Co-operative Research Can Play

The aim and objective of the International Co-operative Alliance Committee on Co-operative Research (CCR) is to promote and support the initiation and furtherance of research activities within co-operatives and research organizations at global, regional, national and local levels, so as to enhance their social and economic effectiveness.

The collective and cumulative work of the ICA International and Regional Committees on Co-operative Research is central to the development of Co-operative Studies as a field of inquiry.

The CCR benefits from strong commitment and leadership from the regional representatives on the executive committee, and continuity provided by the continued and active involvement by previous Chairs. CCR has a strong relationship with and support from ICA, most visibly through the publication of the Review of

International Cooperation, whose articles have relevance for practitioner and academic alike. A diverse mix of academic disciplines and areas of expertise brings a multi-disciplinary perspective to research outcomes, and diverse geographic perspectives provide a foundation for comparative, cross-country and cross-cultural research. Bolstered by new research networks emerging at the Regional level, with greater involvement by cooperative organizations, the membership of CCR is highly motivated to produce research results.

The work of the Committee on Co-operative Research is limited, however, by a scarcity of resources overall with minimal dedicated resources to support its activities. The activities and priorities of the research community are not well understood by sectoral organizations, resulting in a lack of trust and sometimes respect for academic activities. Conversely, the activities and priorities of sectoral organizations are not well understood by some disciplines among the research community. And while many among the membership of the CCR would support a collaborative and coordinated research program linked more closely to the needs of the Sectoral Committees and of the co-operative movement more broadly, the tradition of the “independent scholar” means that no central authority exists to plan and execute a co-ordinated research program.

The International Year of Co-operatives presents important opportunities for generating new research and sharing research outcomes with new audiences. 2012 is a time to build the field of Co-operative Studies as a distinct and valuable field of enquiry. At the same time, an opportunity exists to increase awareness of the activities and priorities of sectoral organizations among the academic community. An opportunity also exists to increase awareness of activities and priorities of the research community among sectoral organizations. Success on both fronts would go a long way toward overcoming the perception of an “ivory tower” and the great divide between academia and industry.

Sectoral organizations face many challenges and could benefit from current, sector-based research. Aligning the activities and priorities of researchers and co-operative organizations is one way to accomplish this goal. ICA Board and staff could assist CCR to serve as a broker in finding researchers to carry out applied and conceptual research for sector committees. The CCR could also facilitate development of a network of university researchers by partnering with regional co-operative research networks and centres to support the discussions of co-operative leaders.

Recommendations

The following set of recommendations are directed toward the questions specifically posed for this session

Identification of Research Gaps

- Improved communication of research results would assist both academics and co-operative decision-makers to know where research has been conducted and where gaps in knowledge exist
- Strive to achieve a greater balance between conceptual and applied research through the use of community-engaged research

Funding

- identify country-specific funding agencies whose mandates are consistent with needs of co-operative researchers
- it is imperative that the co-operative sector contribute toward research funding, either through matching or in-kind, for specific projects and/or research institutes

Facilitating Collaboration

- the CURA model has been instrumental to greater collaboration in Canada and some variation of this model might be of value in other settings. It is to be noted that the model
 - is most effective when working with larger community – based partners
 - takes time to build a partnership
- a brokerage mechanism is required to connect academics and co-operative organizations requiring research support

Effective Dissemination

- the International Review of Co-operation has an important role to play because it delivers research to both co-operative researcher and sector audiences
- academic researchers need to publish in more non- traditional outlets so that results are shared with a wider audience. It must be recognized, however, that this will not appeal to, nor serve the needs, of every academic

Policy Relevance

- “co-construction” is a term in use in Canada and gaining ground in policy circles. Government and sector partner work together to develop policy. To succeed you need a willing government at all levels
- researchers have to consciously look for policy implications of their research results