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Rebuilding Sustainable Livelihoods: Engaging Aboriginal Youth in Northern Saskatchewan
Trappers Association Co-operative (NSTAC)

Abstract

Societies and their institutions require open, dynamic, and exemplary systems to facilitate new ways of thinking and doing. In the Canadian context, co-operatives are engaging and being enriched by Aboriginal communities bridging traditional and social economies to achieve a common vision of a healthy, sustainable community. This paper discusses what one Aboriginal organization has gained from incorporating as a co-operative and how its efforts to reinvent itself and engage youth are redefining co-operative enterprise. If the co-operative form has helped Aboriginal communities revitalize entrepreneurship and resist neo-colonial incursions, Aboriginal communities have brought new energies and understandings to co-operatives, a renewed respect for Indigenous knowledge with a capacity to combine governance and enterprise in fashioning sustainable futures.

1. Introduction

Societies and their institutions require open, dynamic systems to exemplify and hence facilitate new ways of thinking and doing. In the global context of economic, environmental, and financial crises, growing inequality, and concerns about food security, healthy living, and sustainability, the entrenched habits of the First World and corporate elites with access to levers of power (media, government, and resources) threaten to hijack “the” agenda. Elites do so by characterizing climate change and ecological interests as impediments to prosperity, as luxuries (like social justice) we can no longer afford, while reducing the plurality of economies and entrepreneurial models to a single, ruthlessly reductive logic—and multiple bottom lines to the overarching imperative of a single financial one. In the process they distract attention from human accountability for the economic meltdown and either discount or appropriate to their own competitive purposes co-operation and multiple bottom lines. In this context we have an opportunity and obligation to rethink and promote co-operative theory and practice, to stimulate our own cultural memory. In the Canadian context, co-operatives and their principles are engaging and being enriched by Aboriginal communities bridging the traditional and social economies to achieve a common vision of a healthy, sustainable community.

2. NSTAC

This paper traces the history of trapping, the impact of succeeding waves of globalization, colonial and neo-colonial law and policy, the impoverishment of communities, and the efforts of the Northern Trappers Association Co-operative (NSTAC) in Northern Saskatchewan to reinvent itself and engage youth by incorporating as a nonprofit community development co-operative. In the process, the NSTAC redefines trapping not as a quaint legacy of the past, but as an invaluable activity expressing the values of both the ongoing and revitalizing traditional economy and the social economy offering alternative models putting people before profits; autonomous management, inclusion, and democratic participation; and sustainable environments and livelihoods.

The NSTAC breathes a new pluralist meaning into multiple bottom lines and stimulates co-operative cultural memory in resistance to the economic reductionism of capitalist competition. The NSTAC shows what Aboriginal values and practices can mean for co-operative futures and for understanding co-operative resilience in responding to the hostility and amnesia of dominant discourses and globalizing forces.

A co-operative can be a powerful meeting place for intergenerational and intercultural dialogue and community learning. Co-operatives can accommodate tradition and/as innovation in forms of therapeutic and ecological enterprise where young adults can themselves become trappers and educators rather than the ones trapped in the alienating individualism required and rewarded in so many mainstream Canadian institutions.