

Gimme Shelter:

A West Coast Development Co-operative (F.W.C. Devco),

A Case Study in Innovation

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ABSTRACT

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The worker-owned, democratic firm typically features competitive advantages over investor-owned firms (IOFs), and in contexts of adequate support, has proven more durable than IOF cohorts (Bond,2000). However, worker co-operatives typically operate in a 'hostile environment' (Vanek,1970) which systematically favours IOFs. Therefore, worker co-operatives need access to specialist entrepreneurial infrastructure within their service areas. This can assist in overcoming barriers, from discrimination at the bank to mismatched managerial advice to excessive costs for specialist legal counsel. Systemic development bias is both a barrier to market entry and a competitive disadvantage for labour-managed firms (LMFs), particularly in LMF hinterlands characterized by low worker co-operative densities.

This case study, therefore, reviews a 'bootstrap' co-operative support organization (CSO) which emerged in the British Columbia context in the mid-nineties. F.W.C. Devco provides support to emerging and established worker co-ops in the areas of finance, technical assistance and training, and business and legal advice. In a decade, it has become an important regional worker co-op, and social economy, development catalyst.

This case study illustrates Devco's role as a regional development hub, facilitating inter-regional linkage, innovation transfer and acting as a development accelerator. A triple productivity firm, it is demonstrated that Devco generates private goods (services to client firms), public goods (economic and social development benefits) and common pool goods (creating new sectoral assets like knowledge, networks, infrastructure and lobbying functions which benefit all worker co-ops, and the broader social economy, in the region).

La democrática empresa que es propiedad de los trabajadores típicamente ofrece ventajas competitivas sobre las empresas que son propiedad de inversionistas (IOFs), y en el contexto de apoyo adecuado ha demostrado ser más duradera que cohortes IOF (BOND, 2000). Sin embargo, las cooperativas del trabajador funcionan típicamente en un “ambiente hostil” (Vanek, 1970) que sistemáticamente favorecen las IOFs. Por lo tanto, las cooperativas del trabajador necesitan tener acceso a la infraestructura empresarial especializada en sus áreas de servicio. Esto puede ayudar a superar barreras, como la discriminación en los bancos, asesoría contradictoria en la gestión directiva y costos excesivos por asesoría legal especializada. El desarrollo sistemático de prejuicios en contra constituye una barrera para ingresar al mercado y una desventaja competitiva para las empresas administradas por los trabajadores (LMFs), especialmente al interior de las LMF que se caracterizan por ser cooperativas de trabajadores de bajas densidades.

Este estudio de caso, por lo tanto, revisa una organización de apoyo a cooperativas autónomas (CSO), que emergió en el contexto de British Columbia a mediados de los años noventa. F.W.C. Devco proporciona apoyo a las cooperativas de trabajadores establecidas o emergentes en las áreas de finanzas, ayuda técnica y capacitación, además

de asesoría legal y comercial. En una década ha llegado a ser una importante cooperativa de trabajadores y un catalizador importante del desarrollo y de la economía social.

Les entreprises démocratiques appartenant aux travailleurs possèdent normalement des avantages sur les entreprises appartenant aux investisseurs (EAI), et avec un soutien adéquat se sont avérées plus durables que les cohortes d'EAI (Bond, 2000). Cependant, les coopératives de travailleurs fonctionnent souvent dans un « milieu hostile » (Vanek, 1970) qui joue systématiquement en faveur des EAI. Il faut donc aux coopératives de travailleurs un accès à l'infrastructure entrepreneuriale spécialisée dans leurs zones de service : ceci peut contribuer à surmonter des obstacles allant de la discrimination bancaire à des coûts excessifs pour le conseil juridique, en passant par des conseils d'encadrement dissonants. L'erreur de développement systématique est à la fois un obstacle à l'entrée sur le marché et un désavantage concurrentiel pour les entreprises gérées par le personnel (EGP), surtout dans un arrière-pays caractérisé par une faible densité coopérative chez les travailleurs.

Cette étude de cas se penche donc sur un organisme-amorce de soutien coopératif (OSC) qui a émergé en Colombie-Britannique au milieu des années 1990. F.W.C. Devco offre son soutien aux coopératives de travailleurs naissantes et établies, dans le domaine de la finance, de l'assistance et de la formation techniques, et du conseil commercial et juridique. En une décennie, cet organisme est devenu une importante coopérative régionale, ainsi qu'un catalyseur de l'économie sociale et du développement.

Cette étude de cas illustre le rôle de Devco comme centre de développement régional facilitant la liaison interrégionale, le transfert d'innovation et l'accélération du développement. On y démontre que Devco est une entreprise dont la productivité est triple: biens privés (services rendus aux entreprises clientes), biens publics (avantages économiques et de développement social), et biens en commun (création d'avoirs sectoriels tels que connaissances, réseaux, infrastructures et fonctions de pressions avantageuses pour toutes les coopératives de travailleurs et pour l'économie sociale de la région).

Introduction¹

This case study reviews the experience of a British Columbia (B.C.) co-op support organization (CSO). For the sake of contextual and conceptual clarity, the analysis is prefaced by a few observations about: the broader technical assistance and worker co-operative movements from which this organization emerged; its location, as a 'hinterland' CSO, within the larger global development context of worker co-operation, and; the organization's dual role, as both a business development organization (delivering support to democratic firms) and, a social movement organization (engaged in broader sectoral organizing efforts). This preliminary discussion sets the historical context and conceptual framework for the analysis of the nine main themes which emerge from the

¹ I am grateful to the following for their comments on an earlier draft of this case: Isobel Findlay, Brett Fairbairn, April Bourgeois, and Murray Fulton. Thanks also to Marty Frost. The initial interview was conducted in November, 2005.

case. This, in turn, is followed by a brief discussion of the role of territorial and sectoral logics in shaping Devco's development work. Finally, the conclusion calls for an expanded conception of 'productivity' to better account for the value of contributions by CSOs like Devco.

A movement within a movement

Like every social movement, adult education has also been integral to the movement for workplace and economic democracy². Indeed, a small but highly specialized global cadre of professional co-operative developers has emerged to provide technical assistance to the worker co-operative³ resurgence in recent decades. Typically, co-op developers deliver services in the areas of feasibility analysis, democratic group development, incorporations, business planning, finance and management training. They provide advice and mentorship to boards and managers and may even provide interim management.

This adult education and technical assistance movement has emerged from within, and alongside, the worker co-op movement, checking for plumb foundations and spot-welding for the frontier firms of the emerging democratic economy. Providing important logistical and practical support to worker-owners struggling to launch, manage or expand their own enterprise often also implies a kind of 'border pedagogy' (Giroux, 1988), geared toward: helping working people master previously foreign disciplines such as board conduct, analysis of financial statements, and; coaching managers in the rigors of democratic management.

An analogy might be made to the classical Foucauldian 'specific intellectual' who crusades 'from within' their field of specialization for prison, school or asylum reform. Similarly, these adult educators use their technical expertise in a 'long march through the (economic) institutions.' The specific task of these co-op developers is to enfranchise workers to assume their democratic rights and responsibilities, while negotiating the hard constraints of market competition. Together, workers, their managers and their developers remake workplace cultures, although not in conditions of their choosing – redefining roles, revising business conventions, and re-ordering policies and procedures along the way.

Although many developers work as independent consultants, they often organize themselves into groups, sometimes as worker co-ops. These innovative development

2 As Meek and Woodworth (1990) have argued, Jose Marie Arizmendiarietti, the founder of the great Mondragon experiment (a worker co-operative complex with 70,000 workers), laid its foundations not by launching an enterprise but by first establishing an adult education institution to train workers to carry out the manufacturing and engineering tasks required for self-managing an industrial firm, suggesting a more vigorous adult education and training strategy than more instrumental-technical approaches have recommended. After, all since most worker co-ops are in labour-intensive sectors, have democratic governance structures and tend to adopt flatter management structures, investments in human and social capital will be more crucial success factors and sources of comparative advantage than in traditional, investor-governed firms with low-skill / high turnover workforces.

3 In this paper I focus specifically on democratically-structured, one member – one vote, firms known as worker co-operatives. Undemocratic firms which may be more 'inclusive' of workers but do not extend the democratic franchise, such as those which feature ESOPs, profit-sharing, co-determination, etc. are excluded. In part, this reflects the expertise and orientation of the CSO studied in this case. In part, it reflects the empirical reality that 'democratic' firms simply require a democratic, i.e. co-operative legal structure. This neither suggests that other forms of worker participation are not advances over the strictly authoritarian structure of the traditional investor-owned firms, nor that they don't have the potential, as 'transitional firms' to convert to a fully democratic firm structure.

groups have been described as ‘shelter organizations’ (Vanek,1971; Bennello,1982), ‘resource groups’ (Fairbairn et al.,1993), ‘development mechanisms’ (Webb, 1987), ‘enabling structures’ (Quarter and Wilkinson, 1995), or ‘co-operative support organizations’ (Cornforth et al. 1988). These support groups have been widely cited as critical to the success of emerging worker co-operatives (ibid).

Beyond their contributions to particular firms, these developers have also played significant, and often leading, roles in building effective sector organization. At the most elementary level, they share experience, enthusiasm and ideas from one democratic firm to the next, much like the traveling friars of the Middle Ages once spread the news and gospel from one parish to another, strengthening affiliation with the Papacy in the process. Similarly, contemporary co-op developers often act as agents of movement cohesion – articulating relationships, alliances and identities out of common needs, values and visions. Ideally, their organizational and educational skills help bind workers and their firms, on the one hand, and developers and their networks, on the other, into a tightly-knit development system and cohesive worker co-operative movement. In many cases, such as the one studied here, CSOs also make historically significant contributions to the design and development of new forms of movement infrastructure such as democratic federations or financing pools.

In a situation where the state is generally unwilling to lead and the sector itself is too under-resourced to be able to lead, these intermediary organizations can, therefore, provide valuable animation, organization and leadership to build the movement’s capacity. In the three-legged race that is economic development, CSOs can also help provide the bindings to tie sector and policy development together to move forward. Cornforth and Thomas (1990) have clarified this dual role:

“Ideally CSOs fulfill two overlapping sets of functions, one economic and the other political. The economic functions include: securing external finance to compensate for discrimination in the market and meet the special needs of co-operatives; providing training in areas which are not ultimately covered by the existing educational system, such as co-operative working and co-operative management; and compensating for the alleged reluctance of individual entrepreneurs to start co-operatives. The political functions might include campaigning to secure co-operatives at least equal rights with conventional firms on taxation and legal matters, such as registration; negotiating on behalf of co-operatives with state or other institutions; and working among co-operators and activists to build a dynamic social movement (543-4).”

A Frontier Development Model?

- This case study focuses on the frontline role played by one small, self-financing co-operative support organization (CSO) over the last decade. F.W.C. Development Co-operative (Devco) was first launched in B.C. in 1996. In this case, it will be referred to as ‘Devco,’ as it has been most commonly known throughout this period. Devco is

essentially a marketing body for its professional consultants. They bill all co-op development work through the Devco brand, with 15% of receipts retained by the co-op.

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- Operating in a relative hinterland of the global worker co-op sector, with sluggish demand, Devco is not a conventional worker co-op in that its members now generate most of their income elsewhere. (Although, in periods of peak production, it has been a primary income source for members). Additionally, only about half of the co-ops Devco has provided development assistance are worker co-ops. According to founding member Marty Frost, "It's proven a good marketing vehicle and organizational strategy for its developers. It has become a bit of a pool of cash that its developers can tap into from time to time to top up funding for clients, defray some expenses for its developers for networking type work, finance its developers' own (accounts receivable), buy tools, and so on."

This market-driven, flex-time model contrasts sharply with CSOs typical of more advanced worker co-op sectors and policy contexts. Devco is perhaps the anti-thesis of the highly centralized and much-celebrated Empressarial Division of Mondragon's La Caja Laboral, for example. That 'first world' CSO supports the integrated development of the world's largest complex of worker co-operatives, employing over 70,000, with everything from health services and housing planning to research and development on advanced robotics.⁴ It might be considered a transitional form on the path to becoming a 'middle-range' CSO, like Quebec's network of eleven Regional Development Co-operatives, each of which provide full-time employment in well-staffed and supported organizational contexts.⁵

4 As Ellerman notes, "Even allowing for cultural and economic differences, the record of starting over a hundred firms, including some of the largest producers in Spain, in the last 25 years with only one failure must be seen as a quantum leap over the quality and type of entrepreneurship represented in America where 80 to 90 per cent of all new small businesses fail within five years." (in Dahl, 1985:158)

5 In Quebec, the established co-op sector has actively partnered with government as well as the non-profit sector in the elaboration of the social economy. Established co-ops contribute financially, in the form of dues to the Regional Development Co-operatives (RDCs), and in the establishment of at least six venture capital funds targeted to the social economy. Strategic sector-state investments have created ready access to technical assistance and capital, major development barriers for worker co-ops elsewhere (Quarter, 1989; Cornforth et. al., 1988), part of a concerted effort that has catapulted Quebec's social economy decades ahead of English-speaking North America. The creation of a critical mass of worker co-operatives, in turn, helped establish the case for a new generation of social enterprises -- including multi-stakeholder co-ops, worker-shareholder co-ops and student co-ops. By taking a decisive lead in building the social economy, the established co-ops have emerged as a compelling populist force, capable of delivering regional development where private markets and state power alone have failed.

However, the Conseil de la cooperation du Quebec (CCQ) is a multi-sectoral federation, not a worker co-op federation. Within the CCQ, the province's three worker co-op federations risk being swamped and drowned out by the better represented and resourced established co-op and credit union sectors, even though it is the emerging sectors which are the engines of new firm growth. It has also been noted that in the Quebec model RDC staff are often unable to provide the degree of after care worker co-ops typically needed and are swept off course by job creation quotas that are easier to fill by incorporating multi-stakeholder co-ops, for example, than typically smaller-scale worker co-op operations. RDCs are also vulnerable to the prevailing winds of political opinion. This model contrasts sharply to the network of freelance developers in English-speaking Canada, who work on contract but appear to have been pushed out of the development market by Quebec's RDCs. These specialist developers, many accredited, have played a key role in sector development, a decentralized network spanning a large country and an important resource that should be supported, encouraged and strengthened by any new development initiatives.

In contrast to these leading CSO models, scaled to what we might consider the ‘developed world’ of global worker co-operation, Devco is an example of a ‘bootstrap’ CSO – operating in a region with an under-developed worker co-op sector and uneven state and co-operative sector support. This case will, therefore, be of greatest interest and utility to co-op developers and public policy makers who are located in regions characterized by low levels of worker co-op formation and weak policy supports -- where the bootstrap strategy, for better or worse, most closely ‘fits’ their market and public policy context.

The selection of Devco as a leading case of co-operative innovation reflects: its durability (now in its second decade); its experience (it has a client list of over 100), and; sector recognition.⁶ Devco is widely recognized as a leading CSO, not just in its own primary geographical service area (B.C.), but also on the national stage. The list of Devco’s accomplishments over the past decade is a long one. In brief, Devco’s development team: helped to found the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation (CWCF) Developers’ Network, and the B.C. Co-op Developers’ Network; became acknowledged leaders in co-op development in B.C.; developed protocols for providing management after-care and post-development interim management to client co-ops; established a joint venture development company with Ximeng Technical Consultancy in Shanghai for the purpose of developing trade links between worker co-ops in China and Canada (The company was dissolved after Ximeng was forced to close its doors.); provided technical support and development services for the first new generation co-op in the Yukon; provided technical training to Community Futures Development Corporations in B.C., leading to increased support from C.F.D.C.s for new co-op development; provided technical training to the Prairie Regions’ co-op developers through the Prairie Hub; facilitated the building of co-op development capacity in other regions in B.C.; provided technical support for over 100 new and existing co-ops; facilitated the incorporation of about 70 new cooperatives, and; won the support of the B.C. legal community for Devco doing incorporations, which as a legal service, Devco would normally not be allowed to do. Devco has even facilitated the incorporation of the first co-operative law firm in that province. Lawyers frequently refer clients to Devco and attend its training sessions.

This case study draws out key themes from Devco’s experience as an autonomous enterprise, from the perspective of one founding member, Marty Frost. But Devco’s influence reaches well beyond the provision of direct client support to emerging co-ops. These bootstrap developers have also delivered indirect support to broader co-operative and social enterprise development efforts, and to initiatives undertaken by the wider co-operative sector and the state. The firm’s activities are, therefore, enmeshed in larger development networks and struggles and need to be situated within the shifting realities

⁶ Marty Frost and Melanie Conn, Devco’s currently active principals, are among only 15 fully certified worker co-op developers in English-speaking Canada, making Devco one of only two CSOs in Anglo-Canada to have two fully certified developers. They are both recognized leaders in the community economic development field and have extensive knowledge, networks and professional consulting experience. Conn is founder of the acclaimed women’s economic development initiative, Women Futures CED Society, and the director of Simon Fraser University’s Community Economic Development program. Frost was the General Manager of the very successful CRS, a workers co-op that had grown from 44 staff and \$10 million in annual sales through its wholesale health food and bakery operations in 1992 to about 100 full-time equivalents (FTEs), 63 of whom were members, and about \$18.5 million in business by the time Frost left in 1996. Frost is a founding director of Devco and the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation. He continues to deliver consulting to co-ops through Devco and to non-profits through his consulting firm, Human-Ventures. Frost has been elected to the CWCF executive since its inception a decade ago.

of the development field. This case is, therefore, of broader, strategic significance, both to: the development of a revitalizing worker co-op sector, and; B.C.'s resurgent social economy.

To capture this complexity, this case study deploys a relational approach. Fundamentally, this recognizes the embeddedness of this enterprise, as an 'enterprise-within-a-social-movement.' Straddling the market and the movement(s), Devco is both a 'business development organization' (that services other co-operatives) and a 'social movement organization' (creating conditions for sector growth and strength). Devco, therefore, reflects both individual firm needs and wider movement aspirations. Understood in this concrete, historical duality, we can more adequately and dialectically frame Devco: as emerging from a broader social movement for workplace democracy (somewhat and sometimes aligned with broader co-operative, community economic development [CED] and social economy movements), and becoming a resource, and an active element in the articulation, and extension of that social movement -- with all the tensions, role conflicts, identity crises and synergies that dual role implies. Devco is, therefore, a worker co-operative of a special type, and, as international research in the field has suggested (Cornforth, 1988), and this case reinforces, its success is a critical success factor, too, for successful worker co-operative development (as well as for broader co-operative, CED and social enterprise development) in its service area.

Case Analysis

The findings of this case study are, very briefly, that Devco's development strategy met: entrenched resistance; centrifugal pressures that undermined organizational cohesion, and; uneven support from governments and established co-op sectors alike. However, this is also a story of innovation, based on the development of: a unique financial model; a solid community base; a wider network of self-sustaining infrastructure and inter-regional linkages, and; an emerging regional alliance to challenge the dominant development culture. Detailed case-study observations are grouped along these nine themes below.

Innovative Ideas Meet Resistance

In Devco's early days, due to a lack of information and awareness, the worker co-op option was largely unknown to external agents, perceived as risky, and met by official distrust and hostility. Worse, an over-arching cultural paternalism dogged Devco and its clients, acting as a significant drag on development efforts. "The sense (was) sometimes perpetuated by our own sector, that co-ops are social agencies rather than commercial businesses," according to Frost. He says this systemic stereotyping and derogation of the worker co-op option reflected the influence of "the dominant economy that encourages us

at every turn to get rich at any cost, that perpetuates the power of capital and downplays the value of community.”⁷

The Devco case, therefore, features some of the typical barriers encountered by innovators⁸, particularly those representing non-elite constituencies. Stigmatizing worker co-ops as welfare projects had a predictably marginalizing and disempowering effect. But this characterization reflected more systemic barriers to acceptance. Simply put, worker co-ops are a counter-intuitive concept in an investor-dominated business culture that emphasizes competition, individualism, hierarchy and the assumed supremacy of the investor-owned firm. Counter-posing a co-operative, egalitarian and democratic firm against this dominant common sense is bound to generate cognitive dissonance. Devco’s development path was critically shaped by these cultural, ideological and psychological barriers to acceptance.

Where Devco was able to make decisive gains, it was largely thanks to visionary partners at Van-City and at the Provincial Co-ops Ministry. It also took “new leadership and direction at (what was then) CCA / BC (to bring) new energy and direction to the (wider co-op) sector,” including a realignment of the established co-op sector solidly behind the development of new co-ops and the technical support that required. Creating a culture of acceptance, openness to innovation and inclusion of labour managed firms (LMFs) was a significant challenge. It required the articulation and mobilization of a broadly-based coalition for change that would bring Devco into the wider current of CED and social economy movements.

Given the entrenched barriers to understanding that persist in government and established co-op ranks, the Devco case shows that the engagement and education of regional partners is important to building acceptance. It also shows that development partners can not simply assume worker co-ops and their CSOs have needs, resources or access comparable to traditional businesses, community development agencies or established co-operatives. When asked about lessons government and established co-operatives might learn from the Devco experience, Frost says: “(We need) promotion of the co-op model, and recognition of the value of the co-op model in community economic development. If people in the communities were as familiar with co-ops as a business model as they are with companies, there’d be all kinds of market for development work.”

Self-sustaining infrastructure

Devco emerged to fill an education and resource gap experienced by worker co-operatives. However, its own personnel also needed education and resources to effectively deliver that support. As adult educators, it’s not surprising that Frost and his

7 As Bourdieu (1998:95) has noted of neo-liberalism, IOF-supremacy is a ‘strong discourse,’ in that it has the weight and logic of an aggressive world economic system behind it.

8 In the case of the Community Development Co-operative of Nova Scotia (Hammond-Ketilson, et al, 1992), Manager Peter Hough recounts similarly irrational attitudes: “Even after many years of lobbying and trying to increase government awareness of co-ops, people still run the risk of getting very negative comments from government development officers on the co-op form of business. These comments are usually very ill-informed, blaming business failure on the co-op structure when it was in reality poor management, lack of capital, etc.. These are some of the (same) things which make eight out of ten capital-based businesses fail” (78).

other active partner, Melanie Conn, moved to address their own needs through the formation of provincial and national developers networks that facilitate information exchange and professional development.

Devco was an organic part of a social movement that developed its own self-sustaining educational and resource infrastructure through: the CWCF, the CWCF Developers Network and the CWCF venture capital fund, all organized over the course of only a decade by a bootstrap federation that often operated with only a half-time staff person. The national developers' network introduced the movement's professional accreditation process to insure basic standards of service and benchmarks for educational achievement in core competencies (group development, board training, business management, etc.). These self-reliant educational strategies built significant new capacity for worker co-operation in English-speaking Canada.

The primary sources of education and support to Frost were his own home co-op, CRS, which he managed, and the cluster of worker co-ops in B.C., from which the cadre of Devco's other founding partners was drawn. Through these primary schools in worker self-management (CRS, Edible Island, PSC and Argenta Workers Co-op), Frost and his partners first came into contact, sharing information both informally and through structured exchanges.

But the most important of these formative educational exchanges and relationships were likely those facilitated by the emerging movement's national body, the CWCF. The worker co-operative sector was a massive adult education process as well as a social movement and the federation board and annual general membership meetings were its academy. The federation played an important role in his formation as a developer, sharpening his emerging capacities as he joined the peer-to-peer learning and joint-deliberation that was to define the development of the sector. The eventual formation of the developers' network recognized the educational and technical movement within the worker co-op movement, carving out a legitimate place for developers within the federation, and creating a space to 'talk development.'

Launched in 1990, it was through the CWCF – a vast information clearinghouse and catalyst for development – that Frost learned of other regionalized development activities. “I had been involved with CWCF since its inception in 1990, and had become quite aware of the process of co-op development from activities in other parts of the country. I felt sure it could happen in BC.”

These efforts included CSO-building efforts, pioneered by co-op developers in other regions. Indeed the launch of Devco in 1996 largely reflected the example set by the Community Development Co-operative (CDC), launched only a decade earlier across the continent in Nova Scotia (Hammond-Ketilson, 1992:73-79). Although fundamentally different in structure and finance, Devco is a loosely formed 'replication' of CDC. As Frost recounts, “Peter (Hough, CDC Manager) was an inspiration with the development work he was doing in the Maritimes before and (I think) early while Devco was

operating. We talked with Peter about joining Devco at one time, but Nova Scotia prevailed.”

Community Base

Devco’s launch was guided by the frontline experience of hands-on worker co-op developers who had deep roots in real worker co-ops. Without grounded experience it is unlikely their services would have comparable credibility or value, or that the members would have had the necessary commitment to the project⁹. This specialized knowledge, experience base and first-hand intuition is what fundamentally distinguished Devco from BDOs and government services. It’s what uniquely qualified them to deliver specialist services that truly met the needs of worker co-ops. This cadre of trained, committed worker co-operators was the product of a hardy strain of early co-ops that emerged in the hothouse ecological counter-culture of the sixties in B.C.. Of the six people Frost himself names as instrumental, five were drawn from within that local worker co-op sector.

Given the three-pronged strategy laid out by Frost at the 1996 conference he convened with other worker co-operators in B.C. (establish a CSO, a B.C. federation, and a non-profit for poverty alleviation) and the fact that a conference was convened to do it, it’s clear that the launch of Devco was also conceived as part of a larger *community development process* from the very outset. The development of the enterprise, the development of the sector and the development of B.C. communities were conjoined at birth with this initiative.

Frost describes how he instinctively regrouped, after departing CRS in 1996: “Forming a new worker co-op just seemed like a natural thing to do. I put in a lot of unpaid time at the outset working for Devco. The nature of our business meant that we’d have to have a pretty strong network, and I spent a lot of time generating that network.”

Frost’s proposal was to launch a market for Devco and a democratic federation for the co-ops, a synergistic strategic ideal based on the CWCF model at the national level. Devco’s early developers reasoned that they needed to develop the fragmented community *of* worker co-operatives (including relationships with external agents in the state and established co-op sector apparatuses) into an influential constituency and viable ‘market’ for developers before they could effectively service new development *in* that community. Though the B.C. federation and poverty-alleviation organizations withered for lack of interest, the CSO emerged from this democratic gathering firmly rooted by a process that had engaged, educated and consulted that community.

Inter-regional linkage

⁹ Again, this finding echoes Peter Hough’s reflections on lessons learned from the CDC experience in Nova Scotia: “Having staff with first hand experience of starting and operating a worker co-op, as well as of the communities and the situations they will be working in, is critical for success.” (Hammond-Ketilson, et. al., 1992: 78)

The Devco experience provides a powerful demonstration of the role inter-regional linkages can play in transferring power to constituencies, like worker co-ops, that are marginalized by the local power structure. For example, through their Devco ‘uplink,’ the CWCF served as a lifeline to B.C. worker co-ops, linking them to information and replication models from other regions. This educational and resource lifeline accelerated innovation transfer and leveraged regional growth. Devco was able to leverage national and international connections to build their local institution. Devco projects spanned B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan, Ontario, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, NWT, the Yukon, Newfoundland and even China and Mongolia. Largely, this CSO’s global reach was facilitated through the informal networks clustered around the movement’s federation linkage.

This globetrotting contract-chase may strike cynics as evidence of an ‘enterprise first, community later’ outlook. The truth, however, is that Devco’s outreach effort and the national federation’s referral network provided valuable skill and knowledge building opportunities for BC developers. Furthermore, this export market for Devco consulting played a crucial role in subsidizing Devco’s efforts in the underdeveloped BC market, which could not sustain stable, full-time staffing.

The ‘Accordion’ Financial Model

Another unique aspect of Devco is the open and flexible model which enabled the principals to maintain outside contract work, thereby maintaining the co-operative through years of marginal receipts. Rather than banishing ‘moonlighting,’ this work was actively encouraged. Outside work may have diffused developer efforts and weakened internal social cohesion, but it also kept them professionally engaged, building skills, knowledge, relationships and a record of capable service.

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- Like a manpower co-op, Devco assisted multi-functional consultants to band together to segment and service the market for co-op development services. Since this was an emerging market which could not sustain them, the early Devco was designed to generate work and spread it around when, and as, it was available. This marketing function was no promise of stable employment, and so members each maintained other, more stable, income generating activities or simply moved on.

The Community Development Co-operative (CDC), the Nova Scotia CSO which Frost credits as the main replication model for Devco, had the benefit (and liability) of government-funding, while it lasted. But Devco’s ecumenical approach ultimately proved more sustainable. It also enriched the co-op’s base of knowledge and skills by supporting worthwhile outside efforts such as Melanie Conn’s activities with the Women-Futures CED Society and Simon Fraser University’s CED program, and Marty Frost’s work with non-profit agencies. (These may be seen as forward-linkages that prefigure the articulation and development of a broader ‘social economy’ in BC, a critical conceptual and cultural shift which, as we will see, would also condition the development prospects for regional worker co-operatives.) This ‘accordion model’ of expanding and contracting

Devco as work was available also enabled Frost to engage in significant unpaid volunteer work for the sector's national apex organization, the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation. If it were not for the flexibility provided him by the Devco model, it is unclear that his contribution as a national director would have been felt in the crucial achievements of the last decade.¹⁰

The 'accordion model' was a pragmatic response to adverse circumstances. It enabled contractors to come together and disperse on a contract by contract basis. Uniting under the Devco brand provided them with important credibility and a pool of other experts to deliver required services without incurring the personal risk of surrendering other sources of income in the process.

Lack of integration

Given the powerful centrifugal forces acting on the loosely bound co-op, it's perhaps not surprising that Frost says integration was the firm's principle failing: achieving *member* integration; effective *administrative* integration, and; integration of the firm itself into *sector-building* efforts in the region: "We haven't been able to keep our members involved aside from Mel and I. Our own corporate affairs are constantly in disarray. And Devco has not proven to be a catalyst for building the worker co-op sector in B.C."

In terms of member integration, Frost says uneven expertise levels, training gaps and a lack of steady work that might maintain member adhesion¹¹ led to missed opportunities to grow the co-op. Ultimately, the loose associational bonds of support staff who were not yet developers loosened further, creating increased difficulty in attracting and retaining talent. Given the opportunity to start from scratch with Devco again, Frost says "I'd have more involvement of all the members. Even if they're not doing development, I'd have them more involved in planning and direction and the like."

It is unclear to what extent this turnover might reflect a fundamental design flaw in the open conception of the firm itself as a marketing co-op for member consultants. For, although this instrumental structure implies loose ties of association between geographically dispersed, individual consultant-entrepreneurs preoccupied with

¹⁰ Although beyond the scope of this analysis, those achievements include staging annual conferences, the launch of a developers' network, the creation of an RRSP service to member co-ops, the launch of a pilot, \$1.5 million venture capital fund for worker co-operatives, the introduction of an accreditation system for worker co-op developers, and management of Co-op Zone, an online clearinghouse for co-operative development information.

¹¹ Fairbairn (2004) has argued persuasively that cohesion is a highly contingent, reciprocal social relationship that requires the active, voluntary commitment or 'adhesion' of agents. As a structural property, social cohesion depends inherently, on individual adhesion, defined as "the conscious act of associating oneself with a mutual entity" (40-47).

generating their own work from small projects and funneling it through the co-op, Frost observes that the central problem was a lack of work to go around.¹²

Finally, Frost suggests that, despite considerable groundwork, the idea of creating a B.C. federation of worker co-ops simply did not catch the imagination (or dues) of other BC worker co-ops. One assumes members simply felt the cost in time, energy and / or dues exceeded the benefit, and regrouped to focus their scarce resources on their own needy home-co-ops. A missed opportunity to invest in stable, regional development capacity to be sure, Devco wisely followed the demand and focused on the technical assistance rather than the associational side at the time.

Uneven Government Support

Where worker co-op development has been successful in recent years, state support has been key. As Craddock and Kennedy (2006) note, U.K. sector growth has declined with the withdrawal of support to CSOs while steady sector growth has continued across the channel in France, climbing steadily from about 1290 worker co-ops in 1993 to 1580 in 2003 or about 22%. Indeed, other countries with supportive policies toward the firm model such as Spain and Italy have all seen continued growth while the U.K. has lagged behind. In Canada, the same pattern is evident with an overall sector growth from about 420 worker co-ops in 1993 to over 700 in 2003. Modest federal support to worker co-operatives corresponded with a 25% growth in English-speaking Canada from 1993 to 2003. In Quebec, where federal support overlapped with a much more aggressive policy of co-op development,¹³ formation rates spiked 87% during that decade. While these correlations don't prove a causal relationship, they are strongly suggestive of a significantly positive relationship between development infrastructure and firm formation and survival. This record points to the need for more effective education of policy-makers on the importance of strategic

¹² The dilemma is that members want to develop the market to build receipts, grow Devco and provide decent incomes to the members. But building the market requires more staff – who make claims on limited incomes before the long-range returns on that work materializes. In a market that is not growing or does not have the clear potential to grow relatively quickly, the members are faced with a zero-sum game. They either accommodate a small market by trimming costs or they invest in growing the market at the expense of their short to medium term earnings (and risk potentially training their competition, too). Without public or sectoral investment in upstream promotions or service delivery contracts to help cover those market development costs, expecting either the firm or a junior member to take that risk is simply unrealistic.

¹³ Although the province's network of eleven RDCs are each 'second tier' co-operatives that bring together regional co-operative and credit union representatives, the sector's dues and service fees account for only a small fraction of the cost of running them. The government was contributing about \$300,000 a year, for example, to Conseil Des Co-operatives De L'Outaouais in 1991. With an average of 8 new start-ups generated annually, most of them worker co-ops, the government viewed the investment in the five-staff RDC as prudent. (Fairbairn, et al; 1993, 51). The Province's present Co-operative Development Policy calls for a \$20 million commitment over three years, including \$5.5 million to sustain and enhance the RDC network (Quebec,2003,11).

investments in establishing specialist entrepreneurial infrastructure for the social economy.¹⁴

In Devco's case, state support provided significant regional development leverage. However, it has been modest, inconsistent and frequently indirect. At the federal level, government support for CWCF directors to travel to meetings connected Frost with a broad network of developers, highlighting new evidence of what had been achieved in other jurisdictions, and even putting him directly into contact with Peter Hough, the General Manager of CDC (ibid:73-79), the co-operative development organization which Devco loosely replicated. The accomplishments of CWCF and, indirectly of Devco, are clear evidence of the exponential return on federal investment for backing the CWCF's infrastructure development efforts and the knowledge networks that emerged from them.

At the provincial level, however, support was more uneven. Political volatility both advanced and restrained Devco's contributions. Frost says that, until 2001, Devco lacked a 'critical mass' of funded work to retain members during the early stages of sector development in B.C..

“In 2000, government created funding for the promotion and development of co-ops in BC. Devco was front and centre, and in fairly constant communication with the Ministry in all these developments. We provided advice to the Minister and the bureaucrats as the systems were being set up. We carried out contracts for the Ministry, going from community to community educating about the co-op model. In 2001, the Ministry contracted with Devco for “Growing Co-ops,” a large project which combined the development of a co-op in each of three regions in BC, concurrent with training up development capacity in each of the regions where the co-ops were being created. In that year as well, Melanie joined Devco, and worked on the Growing Co-ops project, along with Lyn and myself.”

¹⁴ Similarly, the 1992 report to the Federal / Provincial Task Force on the Role of Co-operatives and Government in Community Development is worth quoting at length on this point: “Experience has... shown that most communities cannot entirely ‘pull themselves up by their bootstraps.’ As the history of co-operatives has shown, every major co-operative movement in Canada today was sponsored originally by some larger social movement and received educational and organizational assistance from established agencies that had staff and resources. This was true of the Antigonish movement, the caisses populaires, and the farm co-operatives in western Canada. Canadian history does not support the idea that bands of individuals just come together to form co-operatives (Hammond-Ketilson et al, 1992:4).”

Provincial openness to *sector-led innovation* leveraged much more than just income for Devco. It meant that legislative, promotional and development initiatives were informed by the sector's best informed advocates, i.e. sector and state development efforts were effectively aligned. This partnership improved the climate for worker co-op development and built the profile, prestige, network and capacity of Devco to solicit consulting and development contracts more effectively, even after the government's fall.

The support of an activist provincial government for co-operative development also reflected and reinforced new interest in development in the established co-op sector, academic circles and foundations. State mobilization strengthened development advocates across the institutional spectrum, the net effect of which was a more buoyant climate overall for worker co-op development:

“I really think that, during those times (the NDP years), we built a large amount of momentum for co-op development in BC. It was during that time that John (Restakis) had just come to BCCA (the British Columbia Co-operative Association), Ian MacPherson got the Institute for Co-op Studies started, Van-City (Credit Union) got really out front with their community development initiatives and the whole social economy concept (took off). Lots of strong alliances were forged between the co-op sector and CED agencies and key people (and) foundations were looking at the model for their community development charity work.”

Devco was even an indirect beneficiary of provincial government initiatives in other jurisdictions, often transmitted through the CWCF knowledge network. Frost alludes to the important support role played by Marty Donkervoort, an investment analyst then-employed by the Crocus Fund, a labour sponsored venture capital fund dedicated to worker ownership and supported, in part, by the Manitoba government. (In turn, a loose replication of the Quebec government supported Solidarity Fund, an initiative of the Quebec Federation of Labour.) Like Frost and Hough, Donkervoort is also a federation stalwart and certified CWCF developer (presently managing Winnipeg's Community Ownership Solutions). Frost also credits as formative what “the folks in Ontario (the Ontario Worker Co-operative Federation) did when they had their (worker co-op development) program under (the NDP government of) Bob Rae.” The worker co-op movement advanced through fits and starts as provincial initiatives created experience

and models from which other provinces could learn, either following successful initiatives, avoiding wrong turns or leap-frogging unnecessary or counter-productive stages. Devco, like the worker co-op movement generally, was both the beneficiary and the collateral damage of the unique policy laboratory that is our federal-provincial system.

One wonders what Devco might have accomplished if not for that abrupt policy reversal in Victoria with the defeat of the NDP government. But, as Frost points out, “we’d built enough momentum and infrastructure that the BC sector has stayed active, including continued development, independent of the Province.” That capacity-building also enabled B.C. to capitalize more effectively on social economy supports from the federal government, another example of the ever-shifting opportunity structure for development. “There are now Federal programs feeding money into an economy that is prepared to do co-op and community development,” says Frost.

But Frost notes it is important to distinguish between government support *to* developers and encroachment on sector development capacity that already exists on-the-ground: “I think one of the best ways that government ...could support would be to stop hiring “in-house” bureaucrats to do co-op development, and help to foster a market for those services by recognizing the sector-based development resources that are already out there. (Too often,) regional government agents were being given responsibility for promotion of the model and doing actual hands-on co-op development in each of their regions. This (flies) in the face of the Federation already having experienced developers in the field earning a living doing that work.”

Uneven Established Co-op Support

As is so often the case with CSOs, the existence of a successful, large lead worker co-op (like CRS) or a cluster of co-ops (like CRS, PCS and Edible Island Co-op) tend to precede and throw forward the leadership for a CSO.¹⁵ An established worker co-op presence, in other words, appears to be key to success. Without it, one is unlikely to have a parent organization to turn to for financial or administrative support or to train developer cadres in worker co-op management. This successful worker co-op parent was a missing ingredient in the CDC experience (Hammond-Ketilson; 1992: 77-78). There, despite representation from established co-ops, none of the board or staff had first-hand worker co-op experience. According to General Manager, Peter Hough, its status as an orphan likely played a significant role.

15 A similar example, in the San Francisco Bay area, is the Cheeseboard Collective – a cheese shop, which diversified into a bakery and then a storefront pizzeria. As part of a cluster of about 100 worker co-ops in the region, Cheeseboard next created the Arizmendi Technical Assistance and Development Co-operative to launch replications under the brand Arizmendi Bakeries. That CSO has established three bakeries to date and delivers development services sector-wide.

Although meaningful established co-op support for worker co-op development has been slow to materialize in English-speaking Canada, Frost says they can give the emerging sector powerful support: “Van-City has been a tireless and deep-pocketed supporter of co-op development. Devco developed a relationship with them early on, and has benefited a number of times by Van-City funding a client who can then hire Devco for technical support and assistance.”

Breakthrough leadership was key to gaining the support of established B.C. co-ops for development work. Frost also credits the key role of “new leadership and direction at (what was then) CCA/B.C.. John Restakis had just taken over (or was just about to) as Executive Director of the B.C. Co-operative Association, and he really brought a new energy and direction to the sector here. Writ large in that new direction was the development of new co-ops and the provision of technical support, and it wasn’t long at all before the whole association had adopted that direction - excellent support for a very young Devco!”

Shifting the culture

According to Frost’s own success measures, Devco’s top three achievements are that:

- “We’re seen as leaders in the field in BC certainly, and to an extent in the rest of the country.”
- “We have respect and credibility with major lenders, funders of co-op development, sector leaders, our peers and the industry.”
- “We’ve been a part of a real change in the Canadian co-op environment, a positive change.”

These achievements are more than marketing benchmarks. They are also measures of educational action, moral and intellectual authority earned, and a development culture in transition. They indicate how much Devco’s educational efforts have effectively resonated with the principle currents of innovation in economic and social development; first, with the CED challenger paradigm, and; later with the enlarged social bloc and new ‘master frame’ of the social economy.

It is impossible to calculate the contribution of Conn’s and Frost’s educational and practical ‘border crossings,’ from below, to unifying the interests, identity and strategy of the non-profit, voluntary and community sectors with the co-op sector to drive development over the past decade. However, this educational-cultural and cultural-political work¹⁶ ultimately helped shift power to emerging co-ops and their constituencies, further priming the climate for co-op development (and developing the market for Devco’s services) in a virtuous spiral of development. Devco helped challenge IOF hegemony, by creating a democratic opening for co-op enterprise in the unfolding,

16 As Baldacchino (1990) suggests, worker co-ops need to wage an aggressive ‘war of position,’ or cultural offensive in favour of the worker coop model, as the best defense against cultural stigma or marginalization.

tacit 'development accord' between co-op development stakeholders, particularly in the BC context. It helped achieve this social project through continuous and far-reaching educational interventions but, most importantly, through the 'propaganda of the deed,' i.e., by helping co-ops get up and running.

Although the gains of this democratic opening, as we have seen with the pull-back of the provincial government, proved fragile and reversible, Devco has played a significant role in shifting the culture in favour of a new openness to economic pluralism in general, and toward worker co-operation in particular. Its cultural impact through this decade long war of attrition has contributed much to the revival of the social economy.

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Discussion: What's in a Name?

Perhaps the best single summary example of the overall strategic evolution of Devco's work over the last decade is the deceptively simple re-branding from F.W.C. Development Co-operative to Westcoast Development Co-operative (a transfer they eventually elected to abandon for accounting reasons). The 1996 name symbolically articulates its close practical association with the Canadian Federation of Worker Co-operatives (hence the initials FWC) and its mandate to take the lead in building a strong, provincially federated worker co-operative sector. Conceived within a life-cycle approach, this stage might be characterized as the co-op's infancy. The name was an expression of the development thrust of the parent organization, CWCF, and took on that name just as a child would inherit their family name – a powerful symbolic expression of joint-interest, common cause and the practical importance of *sectoral organization* to the project of the emerging CSO within an emerging federation.

The 2002 re-branding, although abandoned, nonetheless reflects the failure of Devco's attempts to facilitate a B.C. federation, and a re-focusing of the business as a stand-alone enterprise with a more explicitly open orientation to co-operative development, beyond the worker co-op model.¹⁷ This re-branding might be understood as symptomatic of an institutional identity crisis. In short, the co-op was coming to terms with its internal and external limitations and opportunities, repositioning itself for optimal effectiveness in its natural primary market area (B.C.), and reaching out in the broader cause of "Westcoast Development." In a sense, this stage in the co-op's life-cycle can be viewed as a classical passage into organizational adulthood, as the ties with the parent organization are fundamentally redefined and the co-op seeks its own distinct identity and broader web of relationships.

The displacement of the *sectoral* referent in the name (i.e., the Federation of Worker Co-operatives) to make way for the new primacy of the *region* (i.e., the "Westcoast") reflects the logic of Devco's historical development. The acknowledged leader in worker co-op development with strong links to the CWCF, Devco's growth now appeared largely dependent on the regional resource and opportunity structure. Co-op development

¹⁷ In part, the decentring/ demotion of 'Devco' to a parenthetical addendum reflects the desire to distance the co-op from the cloud of the infamous government boondoggle of the same name in Newfoundland, an association increasingly damaging as the co-o's reputation and market reach became increasingly national in scope.

remained the organization's *raison d'être* but was rearticulated from a sectoral specialism in worker co-ops to a broader CED approach. Indeed, in its successful integration of these *sectoral* and *territorial* logics, Devco can be seen as prefiguring the renewal of B.C.'s social economy in the new Millennium.

In microcosm, Devco's 'archeological layers' reflect the theoretical history of worker co-op development over the last two decades, from: 1) a strongly focused, *autonomist sectoralism* (Cornforth et. al., 1988), a path taken in Ontario¹⁸, through; 2) the 'CED turn,' which introduced a shift in emphasis toward the *geographic embeddedness* of worker co-op development as a regional development tool (Webb, 1987; Hammond-Ketilson et. al., 1992; Quarter and Wilkinson, 1995), to; 3) the 'social economy turn' (Quarter, 1992), which called for the *integration of sectoral and territorial resources within a broader alliance* including co-ops, non-profits and social movements, largely modeled after the Quebec experience (Neamtam and Downing, 2005).

Conclusion: Sector, Territory, Synergy

Devco was always a regional development *hub* acting on a *territorial logic*. It pulled together a pool of local skill, knowledge and experience from the collective experience of its founders in regional worker co-op development. Distilling lessons learned into advice, manuals and workshops, Devco mobilized that knowledge, particularly in B.C.. Generating a broad range of economic and social benefits, Devco has therefore acted as an important community economic development (CED) driver. However, Devco has also always functioned like a *ratchet*, acting on a *sectoral logic*. Its members facilitated innovation transfer from outside the region, most notably from the network developed through the Canadian Worker Co-operative Federation. In fact, the Devco story is an exceptional demonstration of the need, possibility and rewards of *integrating sectoral and geographic approaches* to development. As Lewis (2005) has argued, "accelerated growth of social enterprises is crucial to revitalizing the territories that are the primary concern of CED organizations." Similarly, without CED organization, social enterprise initiatives lack the supportive climate, network, and context to flourish. Lewis suggests that, while CED and the social economy "each place a different emphasis on the scope and focus of development action," they need to constitute "one purposeful movement" (10).

Devco is a monument to the skill its developers have deployed in layering these sector-building, CED and social economy logics into a synthetic practice. The innovative complexity of Devco's evolving business recipe over the past decade reminds us, too, that CSOs need to be carefully distinguished from business development organizations (which are singularly mandated to deliver private benefits to IOFs, often by externalizing costs to the public) or public sector programs (which support the production of public goods, often skewed by partisan agendas or traditional anti-innovation prejudices). Like

18 Frost: "In Ontario back in the Rae-days they set up to provide technical support through the Federation, not alongside it, as we did here in BC. It's interesting to note that their Federation is probably the strongest outside Quebec. Are these two facts linked? I don't know."

other social enterprises, Devco's social purpose enabled it to productively mobilize social capital unavailable to IOFs or the state, unleashing new economic and social development constituencies and developing new markets. By bringing together voluntary effort and social networks alongside private and public contracts, it was able to succeed in driving development where both the market and the state had failed.

Beyond the binary opposition of public versus private enterprise, the work of Devco has been clearly driven by multiple logics or 'bottom lines' that can easily confound conventional business or policy analysis. A more coherent accounting of Devco's contributions, as against private or public provision, might begin by recognizing its *triple productivity*: generating *private goods* to client firms, *public goods* (in the shape of new economic and social development), and *common pool goods* (creating new sectoral assets like demonstration effects, knowledge networks, lobbying influence, and infrastructure which benefit all worker co-ops, and the broader social economy, in the region). The resourcefulness of Devco's co-op developers has enabled: new jobs; stronger and more sustainable communities, and; a stronger sectoral presence. And it has done all of this as a bootstrap enterprise that started with little more than duct tape and gusto, a testament to the power of an innovative idea.

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