

Social Economy Stories

February 2010

**Growing the Good Life One Potluck at a Time
With Phil Ferraro**

Created by the Canadian CED Network

The Social Economy Stories Project

The Social Economy is made up of civil society organizations that deliberately address social objectives through economic action, often aimed at creating greater social and economic equality and opportunity for people and communities most disadvantaged in our current economy. Co-operatives, credit unions and non-profit community organizations, are all part of the Social Economy. The blending of social and economic objectives is taking root across the world as the best means to replace dependency and exclusion with self-determination and self-sufficiency. Canadian CED Network is a member of the global movement (RIPESS) that has formed to promote the Social and Solidarity Economy as the vehicle to transform global poverty and inequality. In Canada, Canadian CED Network and its partner organization in Quebec (le Chantier de l'économie sociale) have advocated for investment in a major national research program to generate evidence and understanding of the impact and potential of the Social Economy. This led to the creation of the Canadian Social Economy Hub with funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The program is co-led by Canadian CED Network and the University of Victoria's BC Institute for Co-operative Studies, with several hundred research partners and projects throughout Canada.

The Social Economy story published here is one of ten stories that comprise the second phase of a two phase project. Complimentary to the first phase, these stories are designed to provide practitioners' perspectives on what the social economy means to them and their communities. The second phase elaborates on the diverse national nature of the movement and how the social economy creates broad-based grassroots solidarity. In particular, the stories you find here seek to highlight the voices of Aboriginal, immigrant and women practitioners.

Phase one Social Economy stories can be found on the Canadian CED Network website, www.ccednet-rcdec/en/stories. These "stories" capture the human face of the sector and demonstrate the Social Economy as a real movement that is addressing the social, economic and environmental challenges of today in integrative and innovative ways.

Acknowledgements

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Growing the Good Life one Potluck at a Time

With Phil Ferraro



Phil Ferraro is the co-founder and co-director of the Institute for Bioregional Studies in Charlottetown, PEI. The Institute hosts “Social Forums,” usually every two/three weeks in Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island. Phil has played an integral role in initiating and organizing these community social forums. He recognizes this work as a contribution towards the Institute’s mission, ‘Restoring Community, Preserving the Land and Informing the Earth’s Stewards.’

At the forums’ community members (activists, academics, politicians, business people, students and trades people) gather to learn about and discuss ideas and strategies for building a sustainable and resilient community. Over a potluck supper they talk about such things as food security, peak oil, making homes more energy efficient, and community renewal.

Ferraro’s work through the Institute includes an array of project management and educational activities. For the past ten years, the Institute has administered a series of programs on behalf of the PEI ADAPT Council: an organization with a mission to assist the agriculture and agri-food industry adapt to new challenges and opportunities and support innovative ways of doing business.

Ferraro is also the Atlantic Coordinator for Local Food Plus, a national program committed to building democratic food systems by certifying farmers who produce local food in an ethical and sustainable manner.

Phil says he was very fortunate to have been influenced by some of the pioneers of the environmental movement. In the early 1970’s he became a graduate student under Murray Bookchin at the Institute for Social Ecology in Northern Vermont.

Bookchin was one of the first thinkers to make a connection between social values and our treatment of the environment. In the essay “What is Social Ecology?” Bookchin defined what he called social ecology:

“Social ecology is based on the conviction that nearly all of our present ecological problems originate in deep-seated social problems. It follows, from this view, that these ecological problems cannot be understood, let alone solved, without a careful understanding of our existing society and the irrationalities that dominate it. To make this point more concrete: economic, ethnic, cultural, and gender conflicts, among many others, lie at the core of the most serious ecological dislocations we face today—apart, to be sure, from those that are produced by natural catastrophes.” [Bookchin, Murray. *Social Ecology and Communalism*. Oakland: AK Press. 2007. p. 19]

After graduating from the Institute for Social Ecology, Phil spent time living and working with Helen and Scott Nearing in Northern Maine.

The Nearings are the authors of *Living the Good Life*, which told the story of their retreat from the contradictions of modern society in the 1930’s to settle on a New England Farm and explore a more fulfilling life lived in harmony with the local environment.

“I’ve always had the attitude that collaboration will overcome competition,” he says. “An economy that relies on constant growth is becoming more and more widely acknowledged to not be sustainable. We need to figure out how to do some kind of steady state economy that provides for all people’s needs rather than trying to indulge in the wants of the more privileged.”

The book, published in 1954, became a major inspiration for the back-to-the-land movement in the 1960’s and 1970’s. And, because of their prolific output of writings and lectures, and their welcoming attitude towards guests, the Nearings continued to play a leading role in the green movement into the 1980’s.

Ferraro says Bookchin and the Nearings set him on the path that he still follows today. “Those two experiences, in my early adult life, cemented my interest in developing models of mutual aid rather than rugged individualistic enterprise development. Building an ecological society is not about finding ways to profit from so-called green technology. It is about assessing the impact that our lifestyles are having on the environment, our neighbours and the neighbourhood,” he says.

“Building an ecological society,” has been the central theme of Ferraro’s work for more than 30 years. His graduate thesis was on the potential of attached solar greenhouses to create food and energy self-reliance. While writing his thesis he supported himself by building solar greenhouses throughout the New England states. In 1980, he moved to Nova Scotia and started Shades of Harmony Ltd.: one of the first certified organic farms and organic landscape companies in Atlantic Canada.

He was a founding member of the Atlantic Canada Organic Regional Network (ACORN) and developed their first educational program: helping farmers make the transition to organics. From 1991 through 1994, Ferraro introduced a series of environmental education courses at the University of Prince Edward Island, including: ‘Introduction to Social Ecology,’ Food Technology and Community Self Reliance,’ ‘Building

a Green Society,’ and ‘Environmental Philosophy.’ In 1995 and 1996, the Institute hosted the first two Permaculture Design courses to be offered in Atlantic Canada.

He says that much of the work that they have been doing has involved trying to develop viable local economies to counter the prevailing multi-national corporate economic system that depends on economies of scale and constant growth. “I’ve always had the attitude that collaboration will overcome competition,” he says. “An economy that relies on constant growth is becoming more and more widely acknowledged to not be sustainable. We need to figure out how to do some kind of steady state economy that provides for all peoples’ needs rather than trying to indulge in the wants of the more privileged.”

But, he says, the responsibility for building this type of economy begins at the local level. “Basically it’s always in my own self interest to make sure that my neighbour is doing well. If your neighbour is well then there is greater community security, mutual aid and a happier way of living than trying to compete with them.”

Hence the potluck supper and Social Forums, which are meant to get people together to develop a sense of communalism and transition from a consumptive and competitive society to one that is egalitarian and sustainable. “We obviously need to revitalize our local communities on a more egalitarian level,” says Ferraro. “The local food movement is hopefully just the beginning of a trend to decentralize and recreate a bioregional economy and a more ecological society.”

For more information about the Institute for Bioregional Studies visit: www.ibspei.ca/