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# Self-Determination in Action

The Entrepreneurship of the  
Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association Co-operative

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**A research report prepared for the Northern Ontario, Manitoba,  
and Saskatchewan Regional Node of the Social Economy Suite**

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Entreprises sociales  
économies intelligentes  
et communautés durables

## SELF-DETERMINATION IN ACTION

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# SELF-DETERMINATION IN ACTION

## THE ENTREPRENEURSHIP OF THE NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN TRAPPERS ASSOCIATION CO-OPERATIVE

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## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
ABSTRACT	1
INTRODUCTION	2
LITERATURE REVIEW	4
Governance and Cultural Perspectives	4
Legitimacy in Organizations	6
Co-operatives	8
Evaluating Aboriginal Organizations	9
<i>Leadership and Vision</i>	10
<i>Partnerships and Funding</i>	10
<i>Socio-Economic Objectives, Culture, and Values</i>	11
Land Ethic	13
Livelihood	14
Education	15
Family and Community	15
Health and Nutrition	16
Values and Aboriginal Women	16
RESEARCH METHODS	17
Limitations	18
RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION	19
The Organization	19
<i>Organizational Transformation</i>	20
<i>Legitimacy</i>	20
Global and Political Context	24

Organizational Obstacles and Opportunities	27
<i>Leadership and Organizational Capacity</i>	27
<i>Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards (AIHTS)</i>	29
<i>Certification and Training</i>	30
Socio-Economic Vision	31
<i>Livelihoods and Business</i>	31
<i>Education and School Programs</i>	32
<i>Health and Nutrition</i>	34
Partnering and the Duty to Consult	35
CONCLUSION	36
RECOMMENDATIONS	37
Legitimacy	37
Leadership, Vision, and Goals	38
Organizational Capacity	38
Educational and Community Capacity	39
Financial Capacity	39
Business Capacity	39
Partnerships	39
NEXT STEPS: 2010	40
Promoting the Justice Trapline	40
Developing an Eco-Tourism Initiative	40
Gardening: Supplemental Income	41
REFERENCES	42
APPENDIX A	
The Seven Co-operative Principles	45
APPENDIX B	
Ontario Co-operative Association FactSheets	47

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## ABSTRACT

NEARLY FORTY YEARS AFTER BEING ESTABLISHED, the Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association transformed its organizational structure, incorporating as a not-for-profit co-operative — Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association Co-operative (NSTAC) — at the beginning of 2007. From the standpoint of the government, the restructuring enhances and formalizes the NSTAC's operational accountability and transparency. From the point of view of the NSTAC, the restructuring is also a commitment to taking charge of its destiny and becoming entrepreneurial and sustainable in order to bring enhanced opportunities to its membership. To ensure the co-operative's legitimacy in the eyes of its members, the benefits of the co-operative model and of legal incorporation — from ownership and control to borrowing capacity and security from liability for debt for individual members — need to be effectively communicated. To build trust with its major stakeholders, the newly established co-operative must also effectively address the needs and concerns of its predominantly Aboriginal membership, respecting their values and traditions and engaging their participation, while also balancing the demands of government and present and future partners.

That is, the key roles of the NSTAC in the traditional as well as the entrepreneurial social economy need to be broadly communicated. In this view, trapping is not a heritage practice tied to the past, but an important player representing the values of both the ongoing and revitalizing traditional economy and the social economy. The social economy, including co-operatives, mutuals, not-for-profits, and the voluntary sector, is associated with alternative development models, people before profits, community economic development, democratic participation, and sustainable environments and livelihoods.

This report — based on a literature review, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews (individual and group) — focuses on these key areas:

- governance structures, policies, and practices
- member participation, learning, and cultural revitalization
- legitimate representation of members in negotiations with government and other outside bodies
- integration of traditional trapper governance and co-operative governance

The report concludes with next steps as well as recommendations to strengthen internal and external legitimacy to support self-determination; to promote the leadership, vision, and goals as well as multiple bottom lines related to educational, environmental, employment, justice, health, and other benefits to traditional trapping culture; to enhance the NSTAC's organizational, financial, and business capacity; to engage membership more thoroughly; to communicate more broadly the community and educational capacity building of NSTAC activities; and to strengthen partnerships with community and other organizations.

## INTRODUCTION

NEARLY FORTY YEARS AFTER BEING ESTABLISHED, the Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association transformed its organizational structure. On the recommendation of the provincial government, the Northern Saskatchewan Trappers Association Co-operative (NSTAC) incorporated as a not-for-profit co-operative at the beginning of 2007. From the standpoint of the government — the primary funder of the organization — the restructuring enhances and formalizes the NSTAC's operational accountability and transparency. From the point of view of the NSTAC, the restructuring is also a commitment to becoming self-determining, entrepreneurial, and sustainable in order to increase its membership and bring enhanced opportunities to current and future membership. To ensure the legitimacy of the co-operative and its board of directors in the eyes of its members, the meanings and benefits of becoming incorporated as a co-operative — from ownership and control, to borrowing capacity and security from liability for debt for individual members — need to be effectively communicated. To build trust with its major stakeholders, the newly established co-operative must effectively address the needs and concerns

of the predominantly Aboriginal membership it serves, respecting their values and traditions and engaging their wisdom and energy, while also balancing the demands of government and present and future partners.

In other words, there needs to be broad understanding of the multiple ways in which the NSTAC remains a key player in the traditional economy while contributing to a holistic and sustainable social economy that gives the membership ownership and control over decisions and directions. The social economy, that sector of the economy including co-operatives, mutuals, not-for-profits, and the voluntary sector associated with alternative development models, is concerned with people before profits, with entrepreneurship with a social mission; with community economic development and multiple bottom lines; with autonomous management, inclusion, and democratic participation; and with sustainable environments and communities.

This report begins with a literature review that focuses on four key issues that are relevant to the development of the NSTAC:

1. developing governance structures, policies, and practices that ensure the organization is transparent and accountable to its members, to its external partners, and to the communities of which it is a part
2. engaging member participation in the activities of the organization where members (separated by large geographical distances and of different socio-historic backgrounds) see their values respected and find opportunities for learning and cultural revitalization
3. establishing an organization that serves as a legitimate representative of its members in negotiations with government and other outside bodies such as community, health, justice, economic development, and educational organizations
4. understanding how the traditional governance of the trappers can be integrated into the formal governance of the co-operative organization and vice versa

Through interviews with NSTAC members and key informants, the second part of the project probes more deeply into the operations of the organization. The study finds that the leadership has a clear vision for the organization and is looking to enhance the organizational, financial, and other capacities of the NSTAC to move the organization forward to the benefit of its members and its many communities. The report concludes with recommendations to promote the NSTAC leadership and vision of self-determination in action; to strengthen internal and external legitimacy; to enhance the NSTAC organizational, financial, and business capacity; to educate more broadly on the multifunctionality of trapping (that

is, the added values it provides in educational, environmental, employment, justice, health, and other terms); and to strengthen partnerships with community and other organizations.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Governance and Cultural Perspectives

**W**ITHIN ANY ORGANIZATION, issues of good governance, accountability, transparency, and legitimacy inevitably arise. What does good governance mean to the organization? How can it be more accountable to its stakeholders? How can it be recognized as a legitimate body?

These matters are all interrelated. If an organization were to focus on improving one element, it could see benefits in other aspects of its operations. For example, good governance can mean enhanced transparency and accountability in the activities of the organization (Ish 2003). To ensure legitimacy, defined as “perceptions by key stakeholders that the existence, activities and impacts of [the organization] are justifiable and appropriate in terms of central social values and institutions” (Rao and Naidoo 2004, 3), organizations can incorporate “tools of accountability” into their structures and policies.

Becoming a legal entity is a significant step towards legitimacy, especially in the eyes of government and outside partners. A legal requirement of incorporation entails “an elaboration of the governance, legal rights and responsibilities of the organization before they are granted a charter” (Newhouse and Chapman 1996, 1,005). Once incorporated, a number of benefits accrue to the organization (Ish 2005). First, by being a legal entity, the organization can enter into contracts with partners and can borrow money. Second, the legal framework can ensure that the ownership and control lie with the members (if incorporated as a co-operative). Third, the incorporated body is recognized as legitimate within the legal system and is a sign that the country (or province) accepts that there is a need for such an association. Fourth, the members are not liable for debts incurred by the organization. Without legal status, individual members can be held responsible.

Incorporation provides, in a sense, societal legitimacy whereby the organization can interact with outside groups with some level of trust and certainty. This legitimacy arises from

the values of those governing or of society in general. Such legitimacy is often associated with disclosure and reporting measures consistent with legal obligations as well as organizational mandates, values, and visions. However, not all organizations share the same standards of legitimacy or of such problematic concepts as efficiency (Stein 2001). Groups differ in the makeup of their membership, particularly with regard to culture.

Context, then, is important in understanding what constitutes legitimacy for different organizations. As noted above, Rao and Naidoo (2004) take into account the social values in determining the appropriateness of the activities of the organization. With his work on Aboriginal organizations, Chartrand (2004) argues that the “universality” of the principles of governance is often based on narrowly defined “Western” concepts. He states, however, that there are values shared by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal societies. These mutually inclusive values could be thought of as being located in the middle of a continuum, while at each end are values regarded as distinctively “Aboriginal” or “Western.” Coming to an agreed definition of legitimacy and good governance within organizations that have both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders requires a fuller understanding of those unique cultural values. For example, decision making by consensus, integration of Elders into the organization, and activities that are more group oriented and nonhierarchical are some of the main characteristics of Aboriginal organizations that may differ from mainstream groups (Chapman et al. 1991). Following this, good governance for Aboriginal cultures may be thought of as being more community-oriented and inclusive, putting greater emphasis on harmony and respect for the land (Chartrand 2004).

Considering that organizations do not work in isolation, there are bound to be countless interactions among stakeholders who do not share the same values. For nonprofit organizations, addressing cultural variability should be given priority, as they must typically work co-operatively with numerous organizations as well as their own members. Plumptre (2007) describes the complexity of such interactions in achieving organizational accountability:

Public purpose organizations typically have a wider range of accountability relationships than those in the private sector. Members, if there are any, need to believe the organization is functioning in their best interests. Funders or donors will want to be convinced that their funds are being used responsibly. Regulators or professional bodies with an interest in the organization will want to be assured that standards are being observed (10).

Moreover, Aboriginal organizations often negotiate with more than one level of government (Mason et al. 2004), and Aboriginal nonprofits, which rarely deal solely with Aboriginal organizations, require leaders who are extremely versatile (Chapman et al. 1991).

### **Legitimacy in Organizations**

The tools of accountability developed by Rao and Naidoo (2004) provide a starting point for organizations looking to enhance legitimacy with sound governance structures. The tools are:

- self-regulation mechanisms such as a code of ethics
- governing boards that consist of people external to the organization but work on behalf of their members to ensure that the goals of the organization are being met
- methods for communicating with stakeholders outside the organization, including annual reports, newsletters, project evaluations, and financial reports
- methods to include the participation of the diverse stakeholders in the planning and evaluation of projects in which the organization is involved

The four initiatives are broad enough to be adopted by most organizations and adapted to the values unique to a given culture. Groups in South Africa, the Philippines, and international organizations have used the tools to suit their specific environment. Aboriginal organizations are also employing these same tools in their operations and activities. Newhouse and Chapman (1996) found that a key to the development of one Aboriginal organization was introducing a code of ethics. With Aboriginal values forming the basis of the code, it set out for all the members how the organization was to be operated.

The second tool (governing boards) has in some cases consisted of Elders to help shape the decision-making process. Elders helped decide what programs the organization should take on and how traditional values could be better integrated into the activities of the organization. In this way, Elders introduced a type of “cultural legitimation” (Newhouse and Chapman 1996, 1,007). Tourand (2004) argues that promoting the wisdom of the Elders is “critical to the success of Aboriginal organizations in maintaining Aboriginal traditions and culture” (16). One Aboriginal organization completed two project evaluations — the first involving Elders and stressing cultural relevance and the other taking a more Western-style approach focused on performance indicators (Chapman et al. 1991). Both evaluations were successful in their outcomes, even persuading funders of the importance of culture to their

programming effectiveness. Findlay and Wuttunee (2007) likewise find that culture is both the foundation and measure of success in Aboriginal women's community economic development initiatives.

These examples support Newhouse and Chapman's (1996) findings on transformations of Aboriginal organizations. They say it is possible for Aboriginal groups to maintain the mainstream Western structure while introducing traditional Aboriginal values into the organization in a process that is "incremental, iterative, multifaceted" and involves a dialectic between old and new interpretive schema until a new shared scheme emerges in the organizational culture (995). The study analyzed the transition of two Aboriginal organizations attempting to transform themselves from groups based on Western principles to ones built more on traditional values. One of the organizations was successful in making the transition while the other was not. By leaving the mainstream structure in place and changing from within, the thriving organization maintained or even improved "external" legitimation. The authors state, "How the structure is interpreted thus depends on what organizational belief system it is viewed from — the Western or the Aboriginal. The external legitimators and the internal membership can both be satisfied with the formal structure; therefore, there is no need to change it" (Newhouse and Chapman 1996, 1,009).

Research conducted by Mason et al. (2004) backs the position that balancing the criteria for credibility held by stakeholders inside and outside the organization is necessary for organizational success. They found that Aboriginal business is largely dependent on both the community and outside stakeholders seeing the organizations fulfilling their specific needs. In most cases, the outsiders may have largely economic interests, whereas the community and members also have cultural and social concerns. Where leadership, vision, and goals find cultural, social, and economic acceptance within the community, as well as economic legitimacy, success follows.

Further, success for the organization in Newhouse and Chapman's (1996) case study came through incremental changes and slowly integrating Aboriginal values into its activities. Methods included the burning of sweetgrass and the use of roundtables at meetings. To reflect the collective approach, groups rather than individuals performed the various tasks required by the organization. Other Aboriginal groups have tried to move away from a hierarchical decision-making structure to one called a "precedence model," where board members are identified as first reporter, second reporter, and so on (Poulin 2004). All of these initiatives are an attempt to build internal legitimation among members.



## Co-operatives

Co-operatives are one type of legal entity. Incorporation as a co-operative requires that the organization adhere to specific legislation and follow certain regulations such as forming bylaws spelling out member, board, and staff roles and responsibilities and having a clear mission statement. As legal entities, co-operatives receive the same benefits as other corporations — namely external legitimacy — as discussed above. However, co-operatives differ from other businesses in that they are established to meet members' cultural, social, and economic needs. Including diverse groups and working for community development, co-operatives have a proven record of staying in communities long after for-profit businesses would have moved to more profitable locations. In many communities too, the credit union is the only source of financial services (Hammond Ketilson and MacPherson 2002). The objectives go beyond economic interests to include goals such as community capacity building, environmental sustainability, and local employment, highlighted in the seven co-operative principles (for details, see Appendix A):

- voluntary and open membership
- democratic member control
- member economic participation
- autonomy and independence
- education, training and information
- co-operation among co-operatives
- concern for community

One of the important aspects of co-operatives is that they introduce, almost naturally, good governance practices. As Ish (2003) states, co-operatives are driven by member needs and based on the one-member, one-vote principle and therefore easily meet the criteria for good governance such as disclosure of the objectives of the organization, open communication and reporting, and the assurance of voting rights.

The co-operative model also seems to be a logical choice for integrating Aboriginal values into a legitimate mainstream organization. According to Bill Lyall, president of Arctic Co-operatives Limited (ACL), Aboriginal peoples have been practising the seven principles “for generations,” “ordinary people” achieving “extraordinary things” in the process (cit. in Findlay 2006). Aboriginal values such as sharing, consensus in decision making, and collectivism are also important co-operative values. For instance, the one-member, one-vote prin-

principle can be easily adapted to Aboriginal traditions of group consensus (Hammond Ketilson and MacPherson 2002). The record of Aboriginal co-operatives, especially in the North since the 1960s, is significant both in terms of numbers and in longevity (Hammond Ketilson and MacPherson 2002; Findlay 2006). Some of the earliest of those co-operatives were developed around arts and craft production, fur harvesting, and commercial fisheries (Findlay and Wuttunee 2007). Owned and controlled by thirty-one co-operatives in Nunavut and the Northwest Territories, ACL is “one of the largest co-op federations in Canada, one that would make the top 500 publicly traded companies while contributing to the physical infrastructure and social capital of community” (Findlay 2006, 45). In 2008, ACL reported total revenue for member co-ops of \$164 million, net savings of \$4.6 million, and \$8.1 million in patronage funds returned to members (ACL 2009).

### **Evaluating Aboriginal Organizations**

Legitimacy is not only a structural issue but is also achieved by becoming an effective organization as perceived by the major stakeholders. Mason et al. (2004) offer a useful list of twelve practices to assess the effectiveness of Aboriginal organizations. Although these indices were developed to evaluate Aboriginal business, they provide an analytical framework for other organizations, including co-operatives and nonprofit organizations. The twelve points of analysis are:

- leadership
- vision and goals
- partnerships
- socio-economic objectives
- culture and values
- entrepreneurship and business development
- global economic context
- business management capacity
- human resource capacity
- financial capacity
- land and rights capacity
- organizational capacity

The practices are not mutually exclusive but overlapping. For example, the financial capacity is largely dependent on the capacity of the organization to develop partnerships, to foster capable leaders, and to develop business management skills. While all of these practices are important, this analysis will develop the first five (leadership, vision, partnerships, socio-economic objectives, and culture and values) in more detail.

### *Leadership and Vision*

The early development of an organization will require the commitment of dedicated leaders who are willing to devote the time to initiate projects, develop partnerships, and create or re-establish trust among the members. The examples of organizational transformation call attention to the role of leaders and their importance in communicating an organizational vision to both members and outsiders. Having leaders who could effectively convey the vision of the organization to all the stakeholders was considered essential to the success of the Lac La Ronge Indian Band (LLIB) and the Kitsaki Management Limited Partnership in Northern Saskatchewan (Mason et al. 2004). Newhouse and Chapman (1996) also stress the significance of the executive leading the change and showing others within the organization how this change could occur. Gradually, however, leaders shift their approach from leading members to serving them.

If the organization aspires to establish businesses, leaders will also play a pivotal role in their progress. Mason et al. (2004) discuss the entrepreneurship process — the ability to take a business idea and translate it into tangible results through business development. Identifying business opportunities is obviously not enough. A key step in the process is to transform ideas into feasible business plans and viable businesses.

Promoting the vision and objectives of the organization is also an important way to increase transparency. The objectives need to be clearly stated to all stakeholders both inside and outside the organization. If stakeholders are dealing with an organization, then they are entitled to know what its goals are (Ish 2003). By being open and accessible, the organization develops trust with key stakeholders and the community at large.

### *Partnerships and Funding*

One of the drivers of good governance is improved access to funding and partnerships otherwise not possible. Once financial support is solidified, then it is incumbent on the organization to maintain transparency and accountability to retain funding. As Plumtre and Laskin

(2003) state, “Because the organization may now have access to funds from the government, foundations, or the public at large, questions of accountability become more salient, as does the role of the board” (1). This statement is especially true today when dealing with governments who are increasingly pressured to achieve fiscal efficiency and responsibility in the context of financial restraints (Depew 1994) and are more likely to demand verifiable results from their beneficiaries.

For most organizations, establishing legitimacy not only ensures continued funding but may also open up more opportunities for partnering. Anderson (1997) states that there is an increasing likelihood of more corporate/Aboriginal partnerships in relation to these trends: a more general acceptance of the value of partnerships in the business world; a growing pressure from the public for corporate responsibility, especially in dealing with Aboriginal people; a larger number of regulations that corporations must consider when entering into agreements that impact Aboriginal lands or people; a growing educated Aboriginal population; and an expanding Aboriginal control over natural resources.

As opportunities for partnering increase, so too does the need to be acknowledged as a trusted organization. Kitsaki and the Lac La Ronge Indian Band found that building trust among partners expanded their access to other financial support (Mason et al. 2004). In addition to increased funding, partnering can open doors to needed resources. Companies seek out key partnerships with other businesses that already have the necessary skills and experience. Poulin (2004) argues, “Due to the lack of accessible resources, partnerships are necessary and omnipresent in the functioning of any organization” (17). Again, the LLIB pursued favourable partnerships not only for financial support but also for expertise they lacked until they had developed into a “complex organization” with a “network of subsidiaries” (Mason et al. 2004, 20).

### *Socio-Economic Objectives, Culture, and Values*

Leadership in the trapping industry faces the challenge of communicating its goals and values to encourage and develop partnerships. Given the current economic outlook of trapping (Brown 2007), future support for the fur industry will come from government, businesses, organizations, and individuals who are sympathetic to goals that go beyond the accumulation of profit. Partners will share the same vision as trappers, focusing less on balance sheets than on alternative goals, including sustainability. Such partners do exist inside and outside the Aboriginal population. The Nunavut Development Corporation (NDC), for example,

evaluates businesses they invest in on a more holistic basis (Mason et al. 2004). According to John Hicks, president of NDC, “by design and intent, it’s [NDC] not to make any profit at the outset. If it was profitable the private sector would step in and do it.” Instead, NDC aims to foster “self-sustaining, locally controlled enterprises, built upon unique Nunavut products.” And NDC understands that self-sustaining enterprises in these market sectors may never be profitable and may always need NDC support to survive (Mason 2004, 22). Job creation is a central concern in their assessments. They consider the impact of work on their communities and look for businesses based on “community strengths and capacities, particularly the resources of the land and a centuries-old ability to use these resources in a sustainable way” (Mason et al. 2004, 22).

Kivalliq similarly bases socio-economic activities on culture, values, and traditional practices in its harvesting, processing, and marketing of wild caribou, musk ox, and char. In its marketing appeals, it likewise incorporates culture and values, promoting not only the meat, but also the added value related to “how the meat is grown, who harvests the meat, and how the hunt is conducted” (Mason 2004, 22).

Elsewhere, there are calls for a new way of thinking about business development. Ish (1992) argues for a broader definition of economic welfare that considers “employment, consumer well-being, environmental sustainability and quality of life” (5). Similarly, Brown (2007) states there is a need for emphasis on the socio-economic contributions of trapping such as education, health, knowledge, culture, and tradition. Jacobs (2002) suggests thinking on a smaller scale: “Policies need to support the livelihood of people at the community level ... to support decentralized, small-scale production and local consumption” (cit. in Mason et al. 2004, 10).

Similar arguments for looking beyond economic indicators in an industry have been brought up in the agricultural sector in countries such as Norway, Japan, and Korea, as well as farm groups in Canada. The “multifunctionality” of agriculture is the central campaign theme; that is, the extra value agriculture provides beyond food production. Additional functions include the preservation of rural life and culture, the preservation of scenic areas for tourism, and the provision of environmental services such as flood prevention and preservation of biodiversity (Forge 2000). Farm groups are asking governments to consider these positive externalities — not just the value of production — when negotiating trade deals or implementing farm subsidies. Farmers also believe that they should receive compensation for the services farming provides.

Trapping organizations are also stressing the multifunctionality of the fur industry. Trapping provides numerous functions beyond simply fur production — stewardship of the land and wildlife; preservation of culture, values, and a unique way of life; and support for healthy lifestyles and community development. Preservation of values is a particular concern for Aboriginal people. Work done by the International Institute for Sustainable Development (2001) indicates that core values for Aboriginal culture may include a land ethic, livelihood, education, family and community, and health and nutrition. The values can form the basis of a multifunctional trapping policy. Each of these values can be part of an integrated socio-economic policy that works to preserve and develop the traditional way of life of Indigenous people.

Simply discussing these values, however, is not enough to pass them on to younger generations. The perpetuation of these core values is achieved through lived experience:

The traditional bush lifestyle does not merely represent a symbolic heritage but rather survives as lived experience (...). The lifestyle does not retain its symbolic vitality and influence by existing as an abstract concept. Rather its value is constituted and maintained through the practice of subsistence harvesting and related activities on the landscape (Hickey et al. 2005, 299).

That is, heritage practices are not so much about the past as about the present and the future — about the Seventh Generation. If public understanding has reduced trapping to fur production and controversy around trapping methods and consumer decisions on wearing fur, there is an opportunity to educate on trapping's broader meanings and value. Trapping practices importantly solidify and sustain relationships, promoting teachings, and opening up new possibilities for collective action, new opportunities (within and beyond the Aboriginal community) to recognize the interdependence of all of us, and shared interests in sustainable alternatives.

### **Land Ethic**

Trapping supports a strong land ethic, emphasizing sustainable land use. Additionally, trapping serves in the preservation of traditional lands. Hickey et al. (2005) argue that reduced harvesting could open the door for developers to move into an area without violating treaty rights. The authors note that much of the decline in used territory is the result of a demise of trapping in those areas.

Further, the special connection to the land may provide opportunities in areas requiring unique skills. Whittles (2005) found that musk ox harvesting in the North “demands a level of specialized traditional skill and indigenous technical knowledge only to be found within the Inuvialuit population” (138).

### **Livelihood**

Trapping provides livelihoods for those who cannot find jobs elsewhere or want to choose an alternative lifestyle. Whittles (2005) stresses independence and self-sufficiency as key outcomes:

Until 20 years ago, trapping provided Inuvialuit families with access to the resources they required to remain economically self-sufficient, yet afforded them the opportunity to do so within a traditional cultural framework of living from the bounty of the land while remaining largely free of dependency on wage labour employment or government social assistance schemes (131).

In a context that offers few job opportunities for youth who wish to remain within Aboriginal communities, Hickey et al. (2005) emphasize that “the stability and empowerment offered by the bush lifestyle becomes a vital resource for people who are trying to negotiate a balance between old and new ways” (298).

Despite the decline in the fur industry, there are opportunities to provide a stable income and to link trapping to other income-generating activities. For Northern communities, a number of related activities fit well with trapping. Harvesting wild plants is one promising side activity. With the decline in the forestry sector, people in Northern British Columbia have looked to diversify into other businesses. Over two hundred nontimber forest products are harvested commercially in British Columbia, including wild greens, specialty wood products, wild mushrooms, and wild medicinal plants, with an estimated value of more than \$80 million (Turner 2001). Complementary activities are key:

Pickers, buyers, and marketers of all of these products, under a co-ordinated co-operative system encompassing a range of products harvested over a broad, diversified landbase, could develop complementary harvesting and marketing plans that could yield a predictable, reasonably stable income for many people (Turner 2001, ix).

Moreover, Chambers (2001) says there is a growing interest in native plants due to the growing awareness of environmental issues, as well as an increasing number of people placing more trust in Aboriginal wisdom and experimenting more widely with traditional First Nations' medicines.

Tourism is another opportunity for people to earn a livelihood. Hunting and the preservation of the hunting lands are an important part of the recreation and tourist industry of Northern Saskatchewan. There is a growing demand for tourist destinations that have an environmental or Aboriginal theme (Mason et al. 2004).

### **Education**

In the context of concern about the failures of mainstream education, including persistent gaps in educational and other opportunities available to Aboriginal people and the average Canadian (Mendelson 2006; Canada 2004), trapping offers opportunities to enrich curriculum. Schools can build on programs operating across the country to introduce youth to trapping, wildlife conservation, and Aboriginal science. In Saskatchewan, the program called Fur Ever instructs children on wildlife management (Fur Institute of Canada 2003). In the Northwest Territories, the Fur Institute of Canada (2003) supports on-the-land programs that educate "youth-at-risk" in a different setting and with more emphasis on traditional Aboriginal values. The educational programs are central in the preservation of Aboriginal culture. As Tourand (2004) states, "It is apparent that if Aboriginal people are going to resist assimilation and enhance their own sense of identity and culture, then they must do so through Aboriginal education" (17).

### **Family and Community**

Hickey et al. (2005) posit, "the practices of hunting and gathering play a vital role in maintaining social structures and relationships, a role far beyond mere recreation" (299). Trapping connects generations of families. Grandparents take grandchildren out on the trapline. Families live in the bush together. In this way, the wisdom and worldviews are transmitted across generations and customary practices regulate behaviour. They teach people their place in the world and their roles and responsibilities in their communities and means for living healthy, sustainable lives. Thus, trapping and harvesting develop and solidify social networks:



The practice of harvesting further serves to maintain social networks between people who share a common worldview that is rooted in the relationship to the land and animals. Spending time in the bush serves to reify a set of values and beliefs that otherwise would exist only in abstract form (Hickey et al. 2005, 299).

### **Health and Nutrition**

Trapping promotes healthy lifestyles and diets among Aboriginal people — a timely emphasis in the context of concerns about rates of obesity and diabetes among Aboriginal people and the proven benefits of country foods (Garriguet 2008; Lupick 2008). Outside the Aboriginal population there is a growing emphasis on natural, organic, and locally grown products, and demand for wild meat and plants is sure to increase. Aboriginal businesses are already marketing natural products around the world. For instance, much of the success of the Earth and Sky Cuisine Company, which is owned by the File Hills Qu'Appelle Tribal Council (FHQTC) of Saskatchewan, flows from a marketing strategy focusing on natural products, all of which originate from First Nations land and traditional recipes handed down over generations (Mason et al. 2004). Further, the FHQTC is committed to promoting environmentally friendly farming and sustainable development. These businesses are built on a foundation of traditional culture, selecting and linking activities that fit the way of life that they wish to preserve.

### **Values and Aboriginal Women**

Although Olsen (1989) states that Aboriginal women are the “silent partners” in trapping, she talks about the essential role they play in all of the values listed above, including developing a strong land ethic, educating children, and contributing to an enriched livelihood. Olsen, herself a trapper in Ontario, states:

Because the Native woman is the home-maker, and in charge of the children if they are too young to go with their father as he checks and tends the traps, she is also to a great degree in charge of their education. As she goes about her work, she teaches them their role in production (a role that does not exist in town or back in the villages). She teaches them a respect for the animals as she skins and prepares the hides. She shows them what part of the animal the

hunter has to return to the earth when it is killed.... The children are taught the rituals and ceremonies of thanking and showing respect to the land and animals (55).

The mother is most often the one who teaches children the importance of taking only what is needed and not wasting the gifts that have come from the land or animals. Olsen (1989) also sees the role of women changing, as more women are involved in protecting the rights of trappers. Today, it is often women who are trying to organize trappers and meeting with government and other stakeholders. She describes this as defending a way of life.

Aboriginal women play a significant role in their family's livelihood, although it is often made "invisible" by government and other policies (Kuokkanen 2007; Findlay and Wuttunee 2007). Among the Sami, the Indigenous people of Northern Europe, who rely on reindeer herding for their livelihoods, women have been marginalized by colonial and patriarchal practices, by cultural and legislative means, by "the myth of strong Sami women" (that obscures discrimination and violence), and by legislation. While reindeer herding women traditionally owned their own animals and often controlled family economies, Sami women are underrepresented in the Norwegian Sami Reindeer Herders' Association, comprising only 22 percent of the executive board (breaking Norwegian law, which requires 40 percent women on boards). Few now have rights to own reindeer and therefore have severely curtailed access to grants and face difficulty in continuing their livelihood if they divorce or become widowed (Kuokkanen 2007). As Joks (cit. in Kuokkanen 2007, 80) argues, if the focus of the reindeer herding remains meat production (since the 1950s the focus of state policy and regulation), then women's output is made invisible. Thus, if the trapping industry can move away from "fur production" to a more inclusive emphasis on the multifunctional role of trapping, women's involvement can be better recognized and valued.

## RESEARCH METHODS

INTERVIEWS TOOK PLACE OVER SIX MONTHS in the summer of 2007. The student researcher, Dwayne Pattison, had the opportunity to attend an executive meeting and an annual convention to observe and to meet informally with NSTAC members. The majority of interviews were done during the River Gathering Festival held in

Pelican Narrows, 10–13 August 2007. NSTAC President Clifford Ray selected the interview participants and researchers conducted both group and one-on-one interviews, carrying out semi-structured interviews with board members, Elders, NSTAC members, women trappers, and members of the community. Interviews lasted from twenty minutes to two and a half hours.

The researchers interviewed key informants and government officials at other times during the project, and there was ongoing drafting, redrafting, sharing, discussing, and reflecting on findings among the research team — especially Clifford Ray and NSTAC members, student researcher Dwayne Pattison, principal investigator Isobel Findlay, and CUISR research liaison Maria Basualdo — in the context of meetings and further annual conventions. Over time the relationships strengthened, the iterative process of reflection deepened understandings, and the research team found its thinking constantly challenged and revised. Questions focused on the vision of the NSTAC, major issues within the organization and its environment, and barriers to and opportunities for the association’s development. Questions also probed issues such as funding, government relations, and the importance of preserving the traditions of trapping, the cultural foundation on which all else built.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of the research are reflective of the organization’s own developmental barriers and the enormous difficulties and costs of travel in the North. Thus, in the early stages, the geographic distance between and linguistic diversity of the researchers and the members of the NSTAC limited the interaction one might typically expect from community-based research. For example, most of the interviews with co-operative members took place at the River Gathering Festival, which limited interviewees to those who participated in the event and who had the resources and/or the desire to attend. The majority of the participants were from the east side of the province. Admittedly, at the beginning, research was conducted from the perspective of an intern looking in — yet listening to and learning from what the participants had to say and continuing to learn in ongoing discussions among the research team and in the iterative report drafting and reviewing process.

## RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

### The Organization

THE NORTHERN SASKATCHEWAN TRAPPERS ASSOCIATION Co-operative is the representative body for about twenty-four hundred registered trappers (numbers that showed a 50 percent increase in 2006 alone) residing in the northern part of the province. The region is divided into eighty fur blocks (each with on average fifty-four to fifty five traplines). The Saskatchewan Trappers Association, which represents the south, and the NSTAC were initially one organization. In the 1950s, however, the Saskatchewan government divided the province into two wildlife management zones and paved the way for two organizations: a southern one more responsive to market forces and a northern one more stable in its traditional values and emphases.

The NSTAC was established in 1970 to address the specific concerns of the trappers in the northern part of the province (Brown 2007). It is a culturally diverse group consisting of Métis and First Nations (Cree and Dené). The executive includes the president, vice-president, secretary-treasurer, and elected representatives from the four regions in the North — the north, east, west and central. With no paid staff, the executive is responsible for meeting with members from their respective areas and communicating concerns and issues to the meetings that are held four times a year. The board is also responsible for lobbying governments and meeting with external stakeholders.

The NSTAC holds an annual meeting in Prince Albert, which is attended by at least two representatives from each of the eighty fur blocks. The meeting is the trappers' primary event and serves as a venue to discuss major developments in the fur industry and to develop policies that can be forwarded to government. At the meeting in 2007, discussions focused on the new Justice Trapline initiative (discussed below) and the school programming that the NSTAC is implementing. The school program will introduce trapping and hunting curriculum into schools in the North. The NSTAC is working with the Northern Lights School Division and First Nations bands to develop the courses.

The NSTAC is the organizer and host of the River Gathering Festival, held annually since

2000. The gathering is a process, not just an event, that seeks to bring together Northern Saskatchewan stakeholders (government, First Nations, businesses, and communities) to discuss land and resource management; develop a northern strategy for self-determination, governance, and sustainability; celebrate the rich culture of the North; and determine economic development opportunities for northern products and services (River Gathering Inc. 2001). The gathering sees the importance of developing a cohesive voice among northern communities, which is essential to “real growth and development, in part suggesting breaking the bonds of dependency and providing a foundation for building fresh and enhanced paradigms of participation, contribution, responsibility and prosperity” (River Gathering Inc. 2001, 2).

The NSTAC is also responsible for trapper training. The association receives annual government funding to pay the salaries of trainers, who are members of the NSTAC. The organization aims to increase the number of trappers in the North by approximately one hundred each year, injecting youth into an aging trapper population.

### *Organizational Transformation*

Operating as an unincorporated entity for decades, the NSTAC received its funding from the provincial government. In the past few years, the government resolved that it could no longer fund an unincorporated organization. As a result, the group faced a legitimacy problem — both with members and with government. With proper bylaws and policies in place, the NSTAC aimed to increase its transparency and accountability.

### *Legitimacy*

The NSTAC has taken the first steps towards external legitimacy by incorporating as a co-operative. As a legal entity, the organization has access to other funding and partnership opportunities. Members selected the co-operative model because the structure has had some success in the fisheries in the northern part of the province. NSTAC members are familiar with co-operatives as many of them also belong to fishery co-ops in the region. Some of the interviewees see the new model opening up partnering and funding opportunities:

Also, when we have that co-operative limited designation, we can go for funding and actually legally take funds to run our organization. We don't have that capability right now so it is very difficult to go that route. But I

think the difference is certainly being a legalized co-operative because it allows you to be flexible to be able to do things. When an investor wants to invest something in their co-operative, it is a legally recognized co-operative and it is legal for them to invest their money in there. The association has not decided to accept money to run its business, but we do accept donations from time to time, but limited donations. But if you wanted a tanning factory to be built, let's say it costs a million dollars, then you need to be a legally formalized co-operative to be able to accept and spend that money. I can see it going that way.

Others suggested that some trappers were hesitant about the new structure and pointed to the need for education on the co-operative model and how it differs from investor-owned businesses:

The co-operative concept needs to be explained to the general membership so we can get their support to go for it, and we also need the board of directors to all agree as well that is the way to go. This has never been done before. People are hesitating because they are not sure what will happen to the organization as a trapping organization. Will it get swallowed up by different types of investors? That is the biggest fear.

In the face of such concerns, members need to understand that only they can invest in and direct their co-operative. They are the owners, and all have an equal say in how the co-operative is run regardless of how much money they invest.

The organization is developing policies and improving its bylaws. The policy and procedures manual outlines the responsibilities of the executive board, president, and committees. Committees defined in the policy manual are membership, fundraising, and facilities and equipment, although these have yet to be established.

New initiatives with partners, including trapper education in schools and a Justice Trapline rehabilitation program, are emerging. These programs represent significant developments in external and cultural legitimacy. They are important means of revitalizing the traditional role of trapping, shaping social and legal relations among stakeholders, maintaining environmental management standards, and healthy and sustainable food sources. The practices passed onto youth preserve the cultural wisdom that sustains the welfare and spirit of Aboriginal communities.

The River Gathering, organized by the NSTAC, is also developing trust and partnerships by giving people the opportunity to share their concerns and aspirations while participating in, as well as learning from, NSTAC activities. By promoting open dialogue among communities and major stakeholders in the North, the NSTAC is building trust among groups that may not typically work together. The meeting is also maintaining cultural events important to the people of the North. Competitions such as the canoe races represent the lived experience needed to maintain cultural traditions and pass them on to younger generations. Major stakeholders in the North were invited to attend last year's NSTAC annual meeting. Involving outside stakeholders in planning and evaluating projects enhances NSTAC's accountability and transparency. To build on the legitimacy gained through organizational structure and partnering, NSTAC leaders may need to keep educating members on the history of Aboriginal co-operatives and the benefits associated with the co-op model, reassuring them about the impact the changes will have on their association and clarifying how member interests are protected and served. One respondent commented on these concerns:

There should have been more consensus, more discussion, more consultation with all the stakeholders first. Because what happened there, only a handful of people decided it amongst themselves, based on their own interests and everything else. So I think that has to go back to the people instead of adopting something where only a small percentage of the population of that whole decided on it.... And a lot of people feel that way too.... What about some of the different areas that we have to talk about? What about structure? Who makes the [decisions]? Is it nonprofit or is it profit? Do we make money and where does it go? There are so many questions that people have.

Of primary importance is for leaders to demonstrate that the transition is not another government-led initiative from which NSTAC members are being excluded. Members need to be aware that co-operatives are member-led enterprises and that consensus building among members is central to co-op values.

The NSTAC has many internal accountability tools in place that may help build trust among its members. The organization is developing a code of ethics to supplement the unwritten agreements by which trappers abide on the trapline. Elders, who make up most of the membership, already have significant influence on and input into decision making. In addition, the NSTAC is making a point of acknowledging Elders for their involvement in the fur industry. Each year, four Elders are given lifetime achievement awards at the annual meeting or River Gathering.

Trappers suggested a number of ways for the NSTAC to develop internal legitimacy and transparency. Specifically relating to the executive, one trapper suggested the following:

I would like to see trappers produce at least \$200 a year to be on the board or maybe a little more.... I know there are trappers that make over \$20,000 a year. Those people are not on the board. We have a problem with that in our association. We have a bunch of people that go there that just choose a person who they want. The good trappers are neglected and don't get on the board.

Another participant stated:

They should have policy where you are only in there for two terms. Because we need fresh blood and we need new ideas. And how do you do that? By saying, you are in here for two terms and that is it.

One of the trappers expressed concern over transparency within the NSTAC in the past and stated that more reporting was needed:

In the last twenty years, we have seen this a few times where people will come on board, and they will get funding using the name NSTA. They will get money from an agency and they will use up the money and we don't even get a report to give the governing body — federal or provincial — so now we can't provide them a final report because the guy that was doing it skipped off.... So the government doesn't want to give us any more funding to continue this process or to go into phase two or three or whatever. So now we have to implement a policy where anybody who does any work for the NSTA, we need a final report before we release any money. That has to be there to protect the trappers association.

Similarly, one respondent wanted more communication within the organization:

There needs to be more consultation. That convention happens once a year. A lot of things happen in that one year. There has to be a communication process within that timeframe. Like maybe a quarterly report. [The executive] could sometimes meet for an hour. I suspect they have somebody taking notes. That particular person can go down to MBC [Missinipi Broadcasting Corporation] and do an on-air interview regarding this meeting and saying here is what we talked about.... They can go right into their traplines and



talk to these trappers by utilizing the media. Trappers are always listening to the radio because that is their lifeline. That is where they get all their information. So if they meet four times a year, four times a year you hear a message.

As the following comment illustrates, trappers saw the need for change with how the organization deals with government in order to move policies forward and see results from the resolutions they have proposed:

So it is a combination of government and past bad experience on behalf of the trappers that has sort of driven them to say, “We have got to do things differently and we’ve got to begin acting more like a lobby organization.” ... And normally when [government] comes to the fish meetings, there is a dialogue and an interchange from the fishermen saying we want these regulations changed or we want this done this way and they give those to the ministers and the ministers respond back and stuff like that. A similar thing was instituted for the trappers so they actually have a product of their convention and so they can actually go from year to year and say this was answered, this wasn’t answered, or this was not looked at and this kind of thing.

### **Global and Political Context**

The NSTAC cannot be fully understood without taking into account the global context in which it and its members operate. Trapping offers a vivid illustration of how global issues and events have very real, local repercussions. The actions of international animal rights groups, for instance, have extensively altered the traditional practices of Aboriginal people in the North. Whittles (2005) describes how the livelihoods of Inuvialuit in the Northwest Territories were transformed by the crash of the white fox fur industry in the 1980s — the direct outcome of animal rights campaigns. The Inuvialuit people, who were relatively self-sufficient, were forced to look for alternative employment or live off government transfer payments. Even if the Inuvialuit chose to eke out an existence following a traditional way of life, the sharp drop in income prevented them from buying the needed inputs such as snowmobiles, rifles, and fishnets. Similar repercussions were felt in Saskatchewan, where the fur industry has yet to fully recover from the crash in the 1980s.

Today, the NSTAC is still faced with the fact that its members are part of a global economy and international events continue to impact local communities and trappers. One recent global development is the Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards (AIHTS), of which Canada is one of the signatories. The agreement came into effect on 1 October 2007, at which time the common leg-hold traps for most fur bearing animals became illegal, requiring trappers to switch to certified humane traps. Despite signing the agreement, there has been no indication from the governments that trappers will be compensated for using the new traps.

At the national and provincial level, trappers are faced with the challenge of overcoming negative public perceptions of the trapping industry. In most circumstances, the multifunctional role of trapping is rarely considered. Trapping is more than an economic activity or residual cultural practice. A broader understanding of trapping's traditional meanings and values, its importance to Aboriginal communities, and the socio-economic benefits that trapping provides for everyone, not just trappers, would likely increase support from the public.

In the political context, the connection Aboriginal people have with government is still very much influenced by colonial relationships. Gulig (2003) describes how government policies had a significant impact on the Aboriginal populations in Northern Saskatchewan. Most policies implemented by the provincial and federal governments showed little regard for Aboriginal communities and were designed for resource development in the North. Regulations on hunting, for example, had more to do with preserving game for tourists than they did for wildlife management. Consequently, fishing, hunting, and trapping became highly regulated. The regulations placed on the activities of Aboriginal people were often in direct contradiction to what was promised in treaties.

Similar sentiments can be heard today from members of the NSTAC. Trappers feel overwhelmed by regulations. Certificates or licences are needed for firearm handling and registration, boating, and trapping. Trappers also expressed their feelings of mistrust towards the government and are especially frustrated with what they perceive as the government's disregard for trappers and their knowledge:

I would like to talk about the land use studies. [We] had to do a planning study. [It's] a big book and very detailed. It tells you about the bush economy and about how people survive and how much money and how much food. And that was done for four or five years and the government said we are going to use it and honour that. Now they used it for their own use.

They turned around and went against us and they put land uses all over the North. They asked us to sit on this board but we were just token people. They didn't want to take our advice.... Government documents are just a way to get more allocations from the poor and more allocation for the minerals and mining and that is all it was. They don't want to take our Elders' advice or those boards' [advice].

Well, they are trying, but the government, like any Indian person will tell you, [doesn't] work with us.... Even if you make a resolution and send it out, they might have a look and throw it in the wastebasket...

Well, I think there has been very little response if any [from the government]. I have no idea why. Many times over the years I have noticed a lot of the trappers will say, "Well, what happened to that resolution?"

One government policy that trappers felt particularly disturbing was what they called the "Let It Burn" forestry management plan. The provincial government will only fight forest fires when they reach a twenty-mile radius of a community. Northern trappers also argue that many of the policies implemented suit the type of trapping done in the south but are not transferable to trapping in the North.

We had a lot of problems with [the Saskatchewan Trappers Association] in communicating. They make the regulations and tack it on us. We can't check our traps every morning because it is a remote area.... We have to fight with nature. It is not like the southern trappers because they can just use trucks. They can cover their trapline in an hour and half every morning. Their country is mostly farmland. Ours is bush.

The story of the NSTAC is also the story of Aboriginal people in Northern Saskatchewan. The culture and traditions of First Nations people are interwoven into the NSTAC's development. And treaty negotiations and land claims are as much a part of the organization's past and future development as trapping traditions. The interaction of Aboriginal and mainstream values is particularly prominent as the NSTAC looks to become more accountable and legitimate in the eyes of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal stakeholders. Cree, Dené, and Métis do not necessarily hold the same values either, nor are their values static. Traditions have also evolved and contemporary values within Aboriginal communities need to be considered as well (Chartrand 2004). It is clear that the sustainability of the organization will be determined by how well it can integrate or balance the different sets of values in its operations and vision.

One thing is certain. The NSTAC will continue to have close relations with government for some time to come, as it depends on government funding. It therefore needs to appear as a legitimate organization in the eyes of government. The NSTAC must build an organization that fulfills the criteria for external legitimacy while holding onto the “Aboriginalness” of the organization. The president of the NSTAC feels that this is possible through the co-operative model:

[The co-operative model] will bring more structure and accountability; the Aboriginal sense of the organization does not change.

Relations may be slowly changing. As noted earlier, there is growing awareness and openness for companies to pursue partnerships with Aboriginal groups. With such a large presence in the North, trappers and the NSTAC may increasingly play a greater role in the development of the region. Further, the global context can also be a source of legitimation for NSTAC and its traditional values, as public concern increases over the levels of chemicals in food, the distance food travels, and the preservation of biodiversity. These trends have renewed interest in Indigenous Knowledge and what it can teach about the properties of plants, among other things. With growing interest in healthy, secure food sources, in country food replacing processed foods that have had such devastating effects on health, groups such as the NSTAC can be leaders in sustainability and become more involved in local food production that serves a niche market.

### **Organizational Obstacles and Opportunities**

Mason et al.’s (2004) twelve practices provide a useful tool for assessing the competencies of the NSTAC. The practices have been regrouped under the headings: leadership and organizational capacity, socio-economic vision, and partnering and duty to consult.

#### *Leadership and Organizational Capacity*

Leadership is one of the main strengths of the organization. Most of the major initiatives (educational programs, the Justice Trapline) of the NSTAC have taken place under the leadership of the present executive. They also have the essential characteristics required to lead an organization in transition including dedication, flexibility, and a vision for the organization. The executive’s dedication to the NSTAC is evident in the fact that many of them pay

out of pocket to attend meetings with major stakeholders. Further, without any paid employees, the organization relies on the board to establish policies, make decisions and proposals, meet with government, manage the books, make phone calls, set up meetings, etc. This puts the onus on a few people to keep the NSTAC functional. Flexibility in working with different organizations with dissimilar values was also noted as a requirement for effective leadership. NSTAC leaders have also shown their willingness to accept change and to work with different stakeholders, including government.

The NSTAC's organizational capacity is buoyed by the willingness of the trappers to work together. When asked what the strengths of NSTAC were, one trapper commented:

Its people. The resilience of the trappers. They work together. At the end of the day they have consensus ... for the best interest of all we are going to go ahead and do this. That is one of its strengths is that it can compromise.

The primary obstacle that the majority of the interviewees noted was the difficulty in communication within the NSTAC, as illustrated in the following:

[There is] very little consultation. There is no communication. Those are the things that need to be beefed up. It will enhance the organization's ability to work with the entire body.

Another respondent noted that the geographic separation of members poses a major challenge. Travel expenses of the executive and the cost of getting members to the annual meeting consume a large part of the budget every year:

The weakness is communication. Transportation. Fuel is costly to get around from one community to the other because the NSTA extends way into the North, to the Northwest Territories border [and to] the Alberta and Manitoba borders.

Communication is certainly a barrier. Letters are so slow. Not all of us have faxes. Not all of us have cell phones. So it is very difficult. And if you are out on the trapline well forget it. There is no use in trying to reach somebody there because we don't have the budget to do a lot of flying or visiting.

The communications make it difficult to improve accountability and transparency within the organization. Stakeholders need to be informed about the activities and outcomes of projects. One participant said that trappers needed to be supplied with satellite phones

and another suggested regular reports on MBC radio. Without paid employees or an office, the organization lacks the stability that comes with a reliable contact point.

The overwhelming number of issues that the NSTAC must deal with puts pressure on a few people to be knowledgeable in business development, lobbying, proposal writing (often with diverse rules and complex reporting requirements), governance, and finance. There is a need to increase the organizational capacity in these areas:

So it is not only you as a person contributing to the organization, you have to know how to deal with bureaucrats and elected people, and if you don't know how to do that, I am afraid your connections are lost and your access to funding goes with that.

Without that kind of proposal writing and support, you are not going to get anywhere and I think that is what NSTA is lacking.

The NSTAC is looking to work on its business development capacity or entrepreneurial capacity, as one respondent makes clear:

We have not established a business plan and I think the NSTA needs to formalize a business plan to get a business, and not only buying fur but maybe tanning fur and then selling fur garment products. We have been looking at this for the past three years and we haven't gone anywhere. Primarily because we don't have the expertise to prepare a proper business plan. And nobody seems to come ahead and say, I will do your plan for you. We need someone to take the bull by the horns and to say go for it. You need to look at all aspects of purchasing the fur tanning or buying it or selling it. Somebody needs to get on top. We also need a tanning place to tan the furs commercially.... We do have a lot of good ideas but nobody has put them on paper....

The number of issues the NSTAC must deal with is substantially greater than the time and resources needed to handle them without government investment in core operational funding and a reduction in regulatory barriers. Significant issues now confronting NSTAC include trapping standards and certification and training, detailed below.

#### *Agreement on International Humane Trapping Standards (AIHTS)*

The NSTAC executive has identified the AIHTS as the most pressing issue. Old traps cost, on average, \$8 apiece, but new traps run from \$30 to \$40. The exchange of old traps for the new

humane traps could cost trappers thousands of dollars. There is also the problem of getting to a store to purchase them.

The NSTAC is lobbying government to put a replacement or compensation program in place. The executive has expressed its concerns over the lack of movement by the provincial or federal governments on the issue. Although by signing the international agreement the Canadian government has ensured access to European markets, trappers feel the government has not followed through in helping them make the transition. Some of the trappers were not opposed to the agreement, even suggesting it was a positive development. They are concerned, though, about the large investment needed to convert their traps. Since the federal government was responsible for signing the agreement, NSTAC feels that it should also be responsible for helping trappers meet the imposed obligations.

#### *Certification and Training*

As stated earlier, many of the trappers interviewed felt as if they were over regulated. The NSTAC is working to set up programs for boating certification and firearm safety. Another concern is getting a group fire insurance plan for trapper cabins, for which trappers have found it difficult to find coverage.

One respondent suggested forming committees to handle some of the burdens:

I personally would like to see committees set up to handle certain issues. Everything comes to the board for a decision, but sometimes the items come up stone cold. We need someone to write up resolutions that might be coming up.... Fundraising is another one. Set up a committee to fundraise. Another one might be someone to do the accommodations and travel arrangements to cut down some of our expenses. We need a separate committee for that. Maybe one person in that committee can come to the meeting or appoint one board member to handle that particular part of the association's business and be on top of it. That way our president is not tied with everything, or the vice-president or secretary, because that is what it boils down to. It seems like there are only three of us that seem to be taking a lead role in everything, but sometimes we get worn out too and we don't do a very good job of it. This way we can disperse the work and probably do a much better administrative job in running the business of the NSTA.

## **Socio-Economic Vision**

The leaders also have a clear vision of where they want to take the organization in the future. They are especially interested in finding ways to make the NSTAC sustainable. As President Clifford Ray stated:

We are not looking for handouts; we would like to be self-sustainable.

He sees the sustainability of the organization developing what he calls a diversification process. He believes that trapping should be integrated with other activities and other businesses in the North. Ideas include harvesting wild plants, developing old dog trails for bird-watchers and tourists, and doing value-added fur processing in the North. He also notes that the North has a rich culture that is rarely seen by outsiders:

There are a lot of misunderstandings, but we have to break that and extend our arms. There are a lot of people that don't realize that northern communities are very friendly and they will help you.

Ray sees the need for training youth and has the goal of adding a hundred new trappers to the traplines every year. He spearheaded the new Justice Trapline project, which has shown great promise for Aboriginal youth and can serve to provide additional income for experienced trappers. The diversification vision reflects the multifunctional role of trapping discussed earlier, which encompasses livelihoods and business, recreation and tourism, education and school programs, and health and nutrition.

### *Livelihoods and Business*

Trappers understand the significance of preserving their way of life even if others do not. One of the primary explanations put forth was to have options open for people who either could not or chose not to leave for opportunities elsewhere. As the following comment illustrates, not everyone can follow the same path:

Not everybody can teach or go into the health training aspect. Yes, it is good to have those people, but those that cannot must have an alternative. And that is what I am looking at. I feel sorry for people that can't get a job. They can't even get a job in a grocery store because they don't know how to run a till or you don't know how to stock shelves. You need to train them in a different field. Maybe they are more comfortable in fishing or trapping. If that



is what they are comfortable in, then that is what they like to do, then give them an opportunity to make a living.

To make trapping a viable and attractive livelihood for people, the NSTAC wants to become more involved in value-added production. To date, the NSTAC has had little involvement in the business side of the fur industry. One trapper noted the need for a detailed business plan that could guide the organization in moving these ideas into actual businesses. There is no shortage of ideas. One informant proposed a supply co-operative as a way of reducing input costs to members. The cost of trapping supplies is a major impediment for many trappers and group purchasing may offer a solution. The Alberta Trappers Association has established a store where trappers can purchase supplies. The NSTAC is also investigating the feasibility of fur tanning businesses or other value-added processing.

It is time the NSTA should have their own fur buying company. We can also have a production centre based in the central part of the province in La Ronge. So we can have employment there. A lot of people know how to sew mukluks and jackets and stuff like that, but they don't have any place to sell them you see. That is where the production centre would come in. Like tanning moose hide. It is a multimillion-dollar industry. A lot of people will tell you, especially politicians, it is not a business any more. It is not a business, they will tell you; it is a hobby. And they are going to help themselves to our land. And we are the ones that are going to live there after they are done....

Other potential businesses include eco-tourism and harvesting berries, medicinal plants, and wood products. Ray talks of all the rich history in the region that is not being shared. Rock paintings and other historic sites attractive to tourists are not being promoted. Further, the growing health food and natural food movements, which emphasize local production, will translate into a rise in marketable natural medicine and foods from the North.

#### *Education and School Programs*

The NSTAC currently operates trapper training and school programs. They are looking for more funding in order to increase the number of students that can be trained in a year. As noted by one of the women interviewed, school programs teach children more than just how to trap. She talks of passing on cultural values and the importance of using the Cree language:

[The children] really like [going to the bush]. And I talk to them in Cree. I told them you have to talk Cree because we are coming to the trapline. Just like when they go to school they talk English and write on the blackboard and do math and everything. And here in the bush you don't have to use a pencil. You have to use your brain because that is your gift, to use your brain and your heart. And I don't let them swear. And we pray and we make fire and we do smudging with Sweetgrass.

Trapper education is an important goal of the NSTAC on many levels. It serves as a way of decolonising education by providing a place for indigenous science and knowledge in the school curriculum. When Aboriginal and mainstream courses come together, young children see that both have value. NSTAC's involvement in course development is also a source of cultural legitimization. People witness the work done by trappers, thereby developing trust with, and garnering the support of, Aboriginal communities. Many trappers commented that the younger generation no longer learn the skills to prepare skins, thereby eliminating a potential source of income as well:

All of our young people don't know how to skin or stretch animals or fix anything. Nobody is making moose hides. You know there is a lot of money in that. A moose hide is about two thousand dollars and it is not hard to fix, but nobody knows. We are losing all of those people that know how to make those.

The fur-bearing animal markets are not paying enough. And our young people are losing their culture and tradition and language. I always say they are pulled in both ways. They want their culture and tradition as an Indian, but then they have to have education to live in this modern day. So they are pulled in both ways, but the white society is stronger. They are going towards the whites now, towards the white way of life. And so that is affecting our way of life too.

As stated above, one of the more exciting initiatives and a significant socio-economic objective of the NSTAC, is the Justice Trapline — a new program designed in association with the provincial government (Warren 2007). For the pilot program, Adult Corrections Services selected adult offenders and volunteer youth at risk to work on the trapline with veteran trappers. The program is intended to get young offenders away from the negative influences of daily life. Both the NSTAC and the provincial government are enthusiastic about the program. The government sees it as an opportunity to relieve some of the pressure on

the heavily burdened justice system. For veteran trappers, it is a way to earn a relatively good income while teaching skills to young Aboriginal people. The benefits extend beyond the provincial legal system, however, as youth are given the opportunity to learn from the wisdom of their Elders, and in so doing, achieve a renewed identity:

When they get in trouble, when they break the law, well of course they send them to jail or give them a sentence. But send them to a camp where they can learn about their culture — how to trap, how to hunt, and all that was done in the old days. If they start learning about the Indian people's ways, maybe they can learn about who they are.

Another trapper noted the benefits to society in general if youth are diverted from a costly justice system (see, too, Findlay and Weir 2004):

We are looking at Sask Justice. These are petty crimes that we are dealing with in the North. [The only ones that benefit are] Sask Justice, the court system, and the RCMP. They are just training more RCMP and where are they coming? To the northern communities. And that is not the answer. As we populate they are going to send more RCMP to come. And who is paying for the RCMP — the taxpayers. So this is what we hope to offset also as we train these young offenders to become something, to be proud of something knowing that they have a title.

Another trapper commented that the government in particular should consider some type of trapper training before and not after the youth get into trouble:

That is an excellent program. That is where we should train people. But let's do it while they are not in trouble. That is better yet. Get them out there. They will feel better for themselves. Now they are not being forced to go and trap out there. I think probably some of the youth offenders probably feel that way. If I was told to go and trap because I was in trouble I wouldn't put my full effort into trapping. But if I went there on my own and wanted to learn the trade then it is best for me to be out there.

### *Health and Nutrition*

A number of trappers commented on the impact trapping can have on the health of individuals. Many made the connection of healthy lifestyles with easing the burden on the health care system:

It is the healthiest lifestyle you can have here. Lots of physical activity; you get fresh air; you work out everyday. Overall it is a very healthy lifestyle.... I just hate to see people that are stuck in communities. They can't go anywhere and they get involved in other activities that are not so healthy for them.

They need to bring out people with juvenile diabetes. Bring them out on the land. There is no couch out there. Over there you have to work for your food. You have got to paddle. You have to chop wood. You have to get water. You have to do all these activities and you're physically active and you're eating good food that is healthy that doesn't have herbicides, pesticides, or any other "cide."

The government, we have told them, it will save them twenty-five years from now, half of those young men, a lot of them are walking through the bushes to get the animals that they are going to be harvesting.... It will benefit them health-wise or either that they will go to the hospital and be diagnosed with having a disease because they sat at home. And this is what we are trying to ensure from the government. You figure you are saving money now but you are not.

### **Partnering and the Duty to Consult**

One of the topics brought up in a number of interviews was the duty to consult. Interviewees felt that the NSTAC should be the primary contact point for companies wanting to discuss possible development projects in the northern part of the province.

Why don't you go to the trapping block and make a deal with the trappers before you start making leases all over the place and surveys all over the place. Go and deal with the trapping block and that is where the Northern Trappers Association would be helping us.

We need to have a real good consultation process and you have to involve the trapping association with the actual trappers in that block. And this has to happen all the time, not just once in awhile. Any type of development, whether it be hydro, mining, forestry — anything that affects the land — they have to have consultation and that has to be a priority.

They believe that the NSTAC is the best representative because of the territorial divisions already created through the fur block and because the NSTAC represents both Métis and First Nations people.

The NSTA knows exactly what they are talking about because they have lived on the land.... It means more to them than anybody else. They are the biggest stakeholders. They are the ones that are not going away....

## CONCLUSION

THE NSTAC IS AT A CRITICAL POINT in its organizational development. It has a new structure that the leadership supports. The leadership itself has a clear vision for the future of the organization. This vision is founded on the multifunctionality of trapping, the added value of positive cultural and socio-economic benefits in education, employment, health, justice, and sustainability as products of the entrepreneurial activities and wisdom of trappers. Currently, the benefits are secured in large measure because of the enormous commitment and contributions of board members, upon whom members and other stakeholders are hugely dependent. To build on their leadership and extend the benefits of multifunctional trapping, the organizational and other capacities of the NSTAC need to be strengthened through enhanced engagement of all its members and through partnering with government, communities, and other outside stakeholders. Building on its cultural values and its own measures of success that include but are not limited to the economic, the NSTAC can strengthen its internal and external legitimacy while redefining the meanings of the co-operative in trapping terms. Traditional Aboriginal and co-operative values can be mutually reinforcing, as the history of Arctic Co-operatives Ltd. suggests (Findlay 2006).

In the current context there are opportunities as well as obligations to educate everyone, including the public and policy makers, on the meanings of trapping — to link with, learn from, and leverage trapping teachings in social enterprises for knowledgeable economies and sustainable communities. In the global context of resource depletion, environmental degradation, growing inequality, and concerns about food security, healthy living, and sustainability, the key roles of the NSTAC in the traditional as well as the social economy need to be broadly communicated. Trapping should be understood not as a residual cultural practice, a curious legacy of the past, but as an important player representing the values of both the ongoing and revitalizing traditional economy and the social economy. The social economy is

associated with alternative development models and concerned with people before profits; with community economic development and multiple bottom lines; with autonomous management, inclusion, and democratic participation; and with sustainable environments and livelihoods.

In encouraging new appreciation for the positive and productive aspects of trapping typically obscured in public discourse that reduces trapping to inhumane traps and Western patterns of conspicuous consumption, the NSTAC can solidify and sustain relationships within and beyond its membership. It can encourage people to think about and act on their interdependence, recognize shared interest in change, and see in trapping new opportunities for the revitalization of cultural life and the customary practices that regulate human behaviour. Trapping culture has the potential to teach people their place in the world, their roles and responsibilities in communities, the means for maintaining community welfare and spirit, and living in healthy, sustainable ways. Self-determination in action!

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### Legitimacy

**W**ITHIN THE PAST FEW YEARS, the NSTAC has taken many positive steps to increase both its internal and external legitimacy. It is likely that the co-operative conversion will have a significant impact on its relations with government. To continue along this path, it is recommended that the NSTAC:

- Develop reporting mechanisms such as an annual report and a regular radio broadcast (possibly in partnership with MBC). A quarterly newsletter for members and partners would keep everyone up to date on the activities of the organization. Reports will serve the goal of internal and external legitimation.
- Promote the benefits of incorporation while ensuring that members are aware that co-operatives are member controlled and that they are engaged in the decision making. Fact sheets are useful tools in this regard (see Appendix B for examples of Ontario Co-op's fact sheets).
- Establish committees to improve internal and external trust. Resolutions are one of the primary ways NSTAC can affect change. Having committees that can create well-planned resolutions will develop legitimacy with governments. Having a committee

that can monitor the status of resolutions, and that reports to members about specific resolutions, will strengthen the NSTAC's internal operations.

- Select committee members on the basis of the contributions they can make to the organization. For example, if business development is a priority, then leaders should be chosen based on their entrepreneurial capacity.
- Maintain and build on the current practices, such as the River Gathering and the honouring of Elders, which preserve Aboriginal values within the organization.
- Position NSTAC as the legitimate body for negotiation of the duty to consult.

### **Leadership, Vision, and Goals**

The NSTAC currently has a strong group of leaders. The NSTAC executive is highly motivated to move the organization forward.

- Communicate the leadership's broad vision within and beyond its membership to make clear the multiple benefits and bottom lines associated with its practices.
- Prioritize issues to help board members focus on organizational goals. This process should be done by consensus at the annual meeting. This will give the board the mandate to move forward on key initiatives.
- Maintain the Justice Trapline as a key priority area. The provincial government has shown interest in the development of the program and will receive support from a large segment of the population. The program is not only a significant source of income for the North, but also serves as a way to connect youth to the land and pass on Aboriginal values.
- Consolidate and expand educational initiatives.

### **Organizational Capacity**

- The NSTAC should consider establishing committees to lessen the burden of the board. The mandate of each committee should be specific. The board needs information in a timely fashion so it can make well-informed decisions. Primary considerations should be given to how these committees will discharge their responsibilities given the difficulties of holding regular meetings.
- In addition to the NSTAC board, the organization needs a core group of volunteers who can work towards meeting specific goals.
- The organization needs a permanent office where documents can be stored and where people can contact the organization. NSTAC should also consider hiring a part-time employee to work on priority areas. Partnering and/or co-location with another organization may be one option.

### **Educational and Community Capacity**

- Formalize certification, training, and educational initiatives.
- Lobby for funding to increase student numbers in each of the programs.
- Partner with bands, school districts and boards, the Ministry of Education, and post-secondary institutions.
- Promote trapping education as an important tool to decolonise education; make space for Indigenous science and knowledge; promote healthy living; and advance cultural revitalization.

### **Financial Capacity**

- Diversify funding sources. The NSTAC is obviously limited in funding sources and needs to find opportunities in multifunctional trapping for the future. Diversified funding (related to certification, training, and education as well as economic development and land and resource management, for instance) will create greater stability in the organization.
- Currently there are only a small number of fundraising events (raffles) that take place at the annual meeting. As a legal body, the NSTAC now has more opportunities for fundraising available to it.
- Consider creating a fundraising committee.

### **Business Capacity**

- Find opportunities for developing the entrepreneurial capacity of the organization. There is no shortage of business ideas for the NSTAC. What is needed now is the entrepreneurial process, in which people turn opportunities into viable businesses with multiple bottom lines (i.e., with economic, cultural, social, and environmental considerations).
- Focus on niche markets. If the organization is interested in value-added production, marketing should emphasize the natural characteristics of the product.
- Consider small-scale production while promoting alternative goals such as employment and the preservation of Aboriginal culture.
- Consider those activities that fit best with the present practices of trappers. Building on traditional practices is more likely to be sustainable in the long run.

### **Partnerships**

- Because the majority of NSTAC members are in the remote regions of Northern Saskatchewan, alliances and partnerships with all governments and other community



organizations are paramount to the future success of the organization. An obvious partnership is with the fishery co-operative as the majority of trappers are also fishermen. Another is the arts marketing co-operative at Big River First Nation.

- Focus on community partnerships. The precariousness of world markets and government support places great importance on linking with communities. It is people within communities who will be the greatest supporters. And although funding from government is particularly important, especially at this stage when there are few alternatives, it is fundamental to the organization's development that communities are included too.
- Consider partners that can help complement and leverage skills and knowledge represented by current NSTAC personnel. The NSTAC can develop partnerships to acquire needed resources. For example, are there opportunities to share office space with the fishery co-operatives? Is there an organization that would share support staff to do basic office work?
- Rather than renting space, approach other co-operatives, credit unions, or organizations in Prince Albert to see if there is space available in their facility to hold executive meetings.
- Determine what NSTAC can offer its partners. The NSTAC has broad expertise and collective wisdom on land and wildlife management, food security, biodiversity, and sustainable development, for example, that can benefit outside stakeholders.

## NEXT STEPS: 2010

### **Promoting the Justice Trapline**

- The NSTAC continues to work on getting the Justice Trapline implemented as an accepted and government-funded program. Those involved in its development believe strongly that it has a real and significant impact on the participants. The trappers have stated their commitment to the program. They are willing to take offenders and offer them training and guidance in the bush. The program is at a crucial stage, as it will need government support to take it from a pilot project to a functional program.

### **Developing an Eco-Tourism Initiative**

- The NSTAC is working to develop a pilot project Building Sustainable Livelihoods through Eco-Tourism, beginning with one of seven proposed communities. The key objectives are to develop eco-tourism activities within the NSTAC that will engage

Aboriginal youth, reconnect the generations, and contribute to environmental sustainability, socio-economic development, and cultural revitalization of Northern communities. The NSTAC's vision is to strengthen the multifunctionality of the fur industry by passing on traditional knowledge and practices to youth in the tourist initiatives in order to preserve the cultural wisdom so necessary to the welfare and spirit of Aboriginal communities. The pilot project will focus on building organizational, physical, and human infrastructure to support eco-tourism as a key activity of the NSTAC; designing, delivering, and evaluating training and education; researching historical sites in NSTAC territory; and doing strategic planning based on the pilot evaluation.

### **Gardening: Supplemental Income**

- Clifford Ray is excited about the opportunity for trappers to supplement their income. The NSTAC endorses local initiatives such as the Muskoday First Nation's organic potato operation managed by a worker co-operative and the community's efforts to promote gardens on reserve. "We support all local initiatives that promote traditional life skills of self-sufficiency and healthy living," says Ray.

A new project is being developed that will help trappers earn extra money as well as provide an alternative, healthy food choice. The NSTAC is set to plant sweet potatoes in the spring at Island Falls in Northern Saskatchewan and is now looking to purchase the tools and seeds required; trappers, who can sell the product to the local community, will do the planting and harvesting. Ray explains that the sweet potato was part of the trappers' traditional diet and was frequently eaten with fresh fish. He adds that potatoes were grown seventy to eighty years ago but trappers stopped the practice, preferring to buy it from the farmer instead. By reintroducing the practice, Ray sees a good opportunity for trappers to raise extra money during the summer. Additionally, the NSTAC is interested in blueberries, which grow well in the Northern climate. Given the growing interest in antioxidants and organic products, blueberries are likely to increase in popularity.

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## APPENDIX A: THE SEVEN CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLES\*

### **Voluntary and Open Membership**

Co-operatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political or religious discrimination.

### **Democratic Member Control**

Co-operatives are democratic organizations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organized in a democratic manner.

### **Member Economic Participation**

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-operative. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-operative, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

\* The guidelines by which co-operatives put their values into practice. Retrieved from the International Co-operative Alliance Web site (<http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html>).

**Autonomy and Independence**

Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organizations controlled by their members. If they enter to agreements with other organizations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.

**Education, Training and Information**

Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.

**Co-operation among Co-operatives**

Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.

**Concern for Community**

Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.

APPENDIX B:  
ONTARIO CO-OPERATIVE ASSOCIATION  
FACTSHEETS\*\*

\*\* Retrieved from the Co-operative Development Toolkits page of the Ontario Co-operative Association Web site ([http://www.ontario.coop/pages/index.php?main\\_id=372](http://www.ontario.coop/pages/index.php?main_id=372)).

# FACTSheet



## WHAT IS A CO-OPERATIVE?

### Introduction

A co-operative, or co-op, is an organization that is owned by its members. Co-ops are formed when a group of individuals come together to meet a common need - co-ops can provide almost any type of product or service imaginable and can operate either on a not-for-profit or for-profit basis. A co-op operates on a democratic system that specifies “one member, one vote”. This ensures that all members of the co-op have an equal say in how the co-op is run, regardless of how much money they have invested in the co-op or how much they use the services offered. Members do benefit financially from the co-op’s activities based on how much they use the service or products provided by the co-op – but this does not impact how much of a voice their vote carries within the co-op.

There are many different types of co-ops operating in many different sectors all over the world. Co-ops can and do offer services of every type in Ontario, including: food production and sale, tourism, health care, day care, funeral services, retail goods, housing, renewable energy, social services, natural resources and financial services.

### History of Co-ops

The first formal co-operative, structured as most of the co-ops operating today are structured, was formed in England in 1844. In a town called Rochdale, a group of weavers came together to address the terrible conditions they were subjected to and take more control of their lives.

The weavers in Rochdale were tired of paying high prices for poor food – so they wanted to start a store of their own. Individually, none of the weavers had enough money to start the store alone, so they, along with the other residents of the community that wanted to be members, started a fund and each contributed a small amount of money to it. Once the fund was big enough, the co-op started operations as the Rochdale Pioneers and began selling basic supplies and foodstuffs. The co-op tracked how much each

member purchased, and distributed the profits in proportion to how much the member had bought. Eventually, the Rochdale Pioneers’ store became so successful that they were able to rent more of the building and use it as a library and for educational lectures.

This was the first example of a working co-op and became the basis for the growth of the co-op movement as a worldwide economic force. There are thousands of co-operatives operating all over the world, including in Ontario.

### Different types of co-ops

There are many different types of co-ops that operate in Ontario – some of these categories have particular legislation that regulate how they operate, but for the most part, the categories below are distinctions that only help define how the co-op operates. These categories also indicate who the members in particular co-ops are.

- A **consumer co-op** buys products in bulk and passes on the savings to the members. The members own the co-op store or must be a member to use the services. Members make decisions about what to sell or provide, where products come from and other key issues. *Mountain Equipment Co-op is a federally-incorporated consumer co-op, as are food co-ops like Karma Food Co-op in Toronto, and most day care and preschool co-ops, like Peter Pan Co-op Preschool in Hamilton, are organized as consumer co-ops.*
- A **housing co-op** gives members access to apartment units and houses, which they co-operatively own. Housing co-ops are formed when people join with each other on a democratic basis to own or control the buildings in which they live. Most mid- to large-sized cities in Ontario have housing co-ops operating in them and providing housing to residents. *Some of the many examples include Bleecker Street Co-operative homes in Toronto, Castlegreen Hous-*



# FACTSheet



*ing Co-op in Thunder Bay and Coop Voisins, a bilingual housing co-op in Ottawa.*

- In a **worker co-op** the primary reason for the co-op to exist is to create employment for its members. The members are both employees and owners of the company, and they operate their business together and make decisions about all the important issues including wages, production methods and finances. Generally, members must be individuals and employees of the co-operative, however some co-ops do allow the employment of non-members on a limited scale. *Planet Bean, a fair trade coffee roastery and wholesaler in Guelph, is a worker co-op, as is TeamWerks Co-op, operating the Simply Fine Wines store in Waterloo, and the Circle Sun Farm Co-op also operates as a worker co-op in Elmwood.*
- A **producer or marketing co-op** allows members to share processing and packaging equipment and pool their marketing to reach more customers. It sells the products of members who may be producers or service providers. *Gay Lea Foods is an example of a producer co-op operating in the dairy industry, while Quinte Organic Farmers Co-op provides marketing and distribution services to its organic farmer members in the Quinte region.*
- A **multi-stakeholder co-op** includes different types of members, with the rights of each class of membership set out in the co-op's bylaws and articles of incorporation. For example, a produce market co-op may bring together farmers, customers and workers as members in the same co-op.
- A **financial co-op** is often called a **credit union** or **caisse populaire**. Credit unions are provincially-regulated, deposit-taking financial institutions which operate on co-op principles, are member owned, and are permitted to conduct business only with their members. A *caisse populaire* is a credit union which conducts its business principally in French. Some co-ops also operate in the financial sector and offer insurance and investment services, either directly with members, or to other co-ops operating in Ontario or Canada. *Meridian Credit Union, Alterna*

*Savings and Desjardins are some of the larger credit unions operating in communities throughout Ontario, while The Co-operators is a financial services and insurance co-operative operating across Canada.*

## The Seven Co-operative Principles

Although co-operatives can operate in many different sectors and either as a for-profit or not-for-profit enterprise, there is one thing that every co-op has in common. Co-ops around the world are organized according to the seven international principles of co-operation.

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training and information
6. Co-operation among co-operatives
7. Concern for community

These principles were partially defined by the Rochdale Pioneers who started the first modern co-op in 1844. Since then, the principles have been refined and adopted by the International Co-operative Alliance (ICA) and in turn by the Canadian Co-operative Association (CCA) and the Conseil Canadien de la Coopération (CCC) at the national level. In Ontario, both the Ontario Co-operative Association (On Co-op) and the Conseil de la coopération de l'Ontario (CCO) have adopted these principles and use them in their work representing the co-operative and credit union sector throughout the province.

## Why Co-ops? Because the Members and Community Both Benefit.

Co-ops have multiple bottom lines that include social as well as economic (or financial) objectives. While the financial viability and stability of a co-operative is important to its members, the primary objective is to maintain access to the product or service supplied by

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the co-op, not solely to increase the rate of return on their investment.

Co-op members are responsible neither to outside owners, nor to government owners. However, co-op members recognize that their co-op operates as part of the larger economic, social and environmental framework that affects people's day-to-day lives in their community. Therefore, they also recognize that there is value in their dollars staying in the community where they reinforce the local economy. As a result, co-ops tend to be stable structures that grow with the community, and contribute to community sustainability. They allow the decision-making process to remain in the hands of those that need and use the co-op services and will benefit from co-op success and positive contributions to community life.

In many communities, co-operatives have stayed to serve their members long after other businesses have fled to more profitable locales. For example, there are numerous communities in Ontario where credit unions are the only source of financial services. Co-ops also have a success rate that is twice as high as other forms of business.

## **Co-operative Legislation**

There are many organizations that may choose to operate in a co-operative manner or by following the seven co-operative principles, even if they do not formally call themselves a co-operative. In Ontario, in order to be able to officially call your organization a co-operative and act as a co-op in a more formal way, the organization has to be incorporated as a co-operative. Incorporation is a formal process overseen by the government that sanctions the operation of an organization as a corporation and provides status and legal rights that allows an organization to accumulate assets, take on debts or raise capital. There are incorporation processes in place for for-profit companies, not-for-profit organizations and co-operatives – both at the national level, and usually within each individual province.

There is special legislation, both in Ontario and federally, which dictates how co-ops can operate and what is required in order to be considered a co-operative under the law. In Ontario, this legislation is

called the *Co-operative Corporations Act*, and it is often referred to by those working in the co-op movement as “the Act”.

The *Co-operative Corporations Act* provides instructions and rules for co-operatives to follow, including how to select the proper name, how to offer and manage investment in the co-op, board representation and member rights, and how to maintain co-operative status.

Credit unions and caisses populaires are the only type of co-op that has different legislation that they are responsible to. They are incorporated and regulated under the *Credit Unions and Caisses Populaires Act 1994* rather than the *Co-operative Corporations Act*.

## **Role of Articles and Bylaws**

The co-op's Articles of Incorporation set out the general parameters of how a co-op is organized and operates. A co-op will also need bylaws, which contain more details about membership requirements, authority and responsibilities for the board, members and staff, and in some cases, mission and mandated activities for the organization. Both of these documents are required parts of effective and official co-op operations.

## **How are co-ops structured?**

Co-ops are another form of business enterprise, with particular differences in their governance structure. These differences put the power of a corporation in the hands of the people. This is a democratic structure that consists of a volunteer board of directors, (elected from the membership) committees and members. The board and associated committees govern the co-op, oversee staff and management and report to the members via annual general meetings or member meetings. There is generally also a management or business structure that consists of the staff of the co-op, reporting to the Board of Directors, which oversee the day-to-day operations of the co-op. Some smaller or less mature co-ops may not have a management structure or business structure in place immediately upon the beginning of operations.

# FACTSheet



## Facts and Figures

- Co-operatives have a survival rate that is almost twice as high as other businesses, when you compare them after 5 years and 10 years of operations.
- A recent federal study has shown that health care co-ops have lower per-capita health care costs than private practice models.
- There are over 10,000 co-operatives operating throughout Canada, with nearly 12 million members, and assets totalling over \$100 billion.
- In Northern Ontario, co-ops are the most significant employer, after government.
- Studies show that co-operative housing costs 71 percent less than public housing projects.
- The first ATM (Automated Teller Machine) was introduced by a credit union in Saskatchewan.

## References

The Ontario *Co-operative Corporations Act* available online:

[http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/DBLaws/Statutes/English/90c35\\_e.htm](http://www.e-laws.gov.on.ca/DBLaws/Statutes/English/90c35_e.htm)

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### Some Facts About Co-op in Ontario:

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- Over 10,000 board members are actively involved in governing and leading co-ops, credit unions and caisse populaires in Ontario.

# FACTSheet



## USING THE SEVEN CO-OPERATIVE PRINCIPLES IN PRACTICAL WAYS

### **Introduction**

A co-operative, or co-op, is an organization that is owned by its members. Co-ops are formed when a group of individuals come together to meet a common need - co-ops can provide almost any type of product or service imaginable and can operate either on a not-for-profit or for-profit basis. A co-op operates on a democratic system that specifies “one member, one vote”. Co-ops around the world are organized according to the seven international principles of co-operation.

1. Voluntary and open membership
2. Democratic member control
3. Member economic participation
4. Autonomy and independence
5. Education, training, and information
6. Cooperation among cooperatives
7. Concern for community

These principles were first developed by the Rochdale Pioneers (please refer to the ‘What is a Co-op?’ FACTSheet for more information) and were modified slightly and adopted as part of the Statement of Co-operative Identity by the International Co-operative Alliance in 1995.

Although co-operatives all adhere to these principles as part of their identity and operations, it can be difficult to determine how these principles can be incorporated in practical ways into the operations of the co-op.

### **Voluntary and open membership**

*Co-operatives are voluntary organizations, open to all persons able to use their services and willing to accept the responsibilities of membership, without gender, social, racial, political, or religious discrimination.*

In order to enshrine these principles in the practical

governance and operations, a co-op may choose to put into its bylaws language that indicates that membership in the co-op is open and inclusive and that no one will be discriminated against as a result of their gender, race, social status or religion.

Co-ops may also make the topic of open membership part of the discussions they have when they form the co-op. This can include determining what an appropriate share and investment structure would be the most inclusive for the purposes that the co-op is organizing for.

### **Democratic member control**

*Co-operatives are democratic organisations controlled by their members, who actively participate in setting their policies and making decisions. Men and women serving as elected representatives are accountable to the membership. In primary co-operatives members have equal voting rights (one member, one vote) and co-operatives at other levels are also organised in a democratic manner.*

The one-member, one-vote principle of governance is one of the key defining characteristics of a co-op and allowing members to exercise their democratic control of the organization is critical to maintaining a healthy co-op. Co-op boards and senior staff should take care to design and implement well-run Annual Meetings that encourage participation and allow the membership to come together and elect their governing board. Board and senior staff should keep members informed on an ongoing basis, either through general member meetings or through other communication tools. The Ontario Co-operative Association has developed a Guide to the Co-operative Corporations Act that includes appendices on how to run effective member meetings, elections for directors and board meetings. This guide can assist a co-op in ensuring that member engagement in the democratic process remains high.

# FACTSheet



## **Member economic participation**

Members contribute equitably to, and democratically control, the capital of their co-op. At least part of that capital is usually the common property of the co-operative. Members usually receive limited compensation, if any, on capital subscribed as a condition of membership. Members allocate surpluses for any or all of the following purposes: developing their co-op, possibly by setting up reserves, part of which at least would be indivisible; benefiting members in proportion to their transactions with the co-operative; and supporting other activities approved by the membership.

## **Autonomy and independence**

*Co-operatives are autonomous, self-help organisations controlled by their members. If they enter to agreements with other organisations, including governments, or raise capital from external sources, they do so on terms that ensure democratic control by their members and maintain their co-operative autonomy.*

In many sectors, co-ops must enter into agreements with outside organizations to ensure that they can operate. For example, not-for-profit housing co-ops often receive funding from the government to support their work, and some co-ops that have programs with large capital requirements (like those in the renewable energy sector) may enter into agreements with other companies or organizations in order to help them finance their projects.

One way that co-ops can maintain their autonomy is to create policies or pass resolutions that indicate how the co-op's vision and mission will be used to guide decision-making or create guidelines about what types of partnership agreements or relationships are acceptable to the membership of the co-op. This can include information on what types of companies the co-op is willing to have relationships with.

## **Education, training, and information**

*Co-operatives provide education and training for their members, elected representatives, managers, and employees so they can contribute effectively to the*

*development of their co-operatives. They inform the general public - particularly young people and opinion leaders - about the nature and benefits of co-operation.*

One of the simplest ways to educate members, staff and volunteers involved with a co-op is to ensure that there is adequate orientation and training for new participants in the co-op that includes an overview of the co-operative model and what being a co-op. Information provided to participants should outline how the co-op works, the co-operative principles and other information that allows people to participate fully in the operations and governance of the co-op.

Co-ops, in particular associations of co-ops like the Ontario Co-operative Association or the Canadian Federation of Housing Co-operatives, also work to educate the public and elected representatives about the co-op model. This assists in raising awareness about the co-operative way of doing business and obtaining support from government on behalf of the sector.

## **Co-operation among co-operatives**

*Co-operatives serve their members most effectively and strengthen the co-operative movement by working together through local, national, regional and international structures.*

There are a number of ways that a co-op can co-operate with other co-ops. One primary way that co-ops can do this is by joining with other co-ops through membership in a federation or association of co-ops. For example, worker co-ops can become a member of the Ontario Worker Co-op Federation in order to connect with other worker co-ops and share knowledge and experiences with each other. In turn, federations like the Ontario Worker Co-op Federation can also join associations like the Canadian Worker Co-op Federation or the Ontario Co-operative Association in order to support larger networks of co-ops.

Another way that co-ops can co-operate with and support each other is by doing business with each other. Co-ops can choose to place a priority on purchasing goods and services from other co-operatives, even if it may be slightly more expensive or less convenient. By choosing to do

# FACTSheet



business with co-ops above other types of businesses, co-ops can demonstrate the importance of doing business in the co-operative manner and that supporting the sector is important. This also shows support for supporting multiple bottom lines and that the financial bottom line is not the one of sole importance.

## **Concern for community**

*Co-operatives work for the sustainable development of their communities through policies approved by their members.*

Co-ops have multiple bottom lines that include social as well as economic (or financial) objectives. While the financial viability and stability of a co-operative is important to its members, the primary objective is to maintain access to the product or service supplied by the co-op, not solely to increase the rate of return on their investment. Co-op members are responsible neither to outside owners, nor to government owners. However, co-op members recognize that their co-op operates as part of the larger economic, social and environmental framework that affects people's day-to-day lives in their community.

As a result of commitment to this principle, in many communities, co-operatives have stayed to serve their members long after other businesses have fled to more profitable locales. For example, there are numerous communities in Ontario where credit

unions are the only source of financial services.

Other examples of this principle would include ethical purchasing guidelines, like agreeing to support the community through donations to local charitable causes, other co-operatives or community activities. For example, The Co-operators donates approximately a percentage of its pre-tax income to charities and co-op development initiatives all over the country as a way to demonstrate its concern for community.

Many co-operatives and credit unions choose to articulate their concern for community through corporate social responsibility or co-op social responsibility reports that show how the organization has demonstrated this principle in its operations.

## **References:**

International Co-operative Alliance Statement on the Co-operative Identity:

<http://www.ica.coop/coop/principles.html>

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- 1.4 million Ontarians are members of co-operatives, credit unions and caisse populaires (more than 10% of the population).
- Over 10,000 board members are actively involved in governing and leading co-ops, credit unions and caisse populaires in Ontario.

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# FACTSheet



## CO-OPERATIVES AND THE GOVERNMENT

### *Introduction*

Co-operatives are a form of business enterprise that are different from both not-for-profit organizations and private businesses. Co-ops have a unique democratic structure and socio-economic foundation that makes them inherently people and community focused. This also makes co-operatives well-suited to assist in meeting government priorities related to enhancing economic growth, social development and building stronger, more sustainable communities.

### *Co-op basics*

Co-operatives are member-owned businesses that are organized to meet a common community need. They operate on a range of scales, from small co-operatives of less than 10 members to large co-operatives operating provincially and nationally.<sup>1</sup> Co-ops offer services of every type in Ontario, including: housing, child care, health care, financial services, renewable energy, natural resources, transportation, food production and sale, tourism, retail, social services and even funeral services.

A co-op operates on a "one member, one vote" system. This ensures that all members of the co-op have an equal say in how the co-op is run, regardless of how much money they have invested in the co-op or how much they use the services offered. Members do benefit financially from the co-op's activities based on how much they use the service or products provided by the co-op – but this does not impact how much of a voice their vote carries within the co-op. This is a key distinguishing factor from privately-run business enterprises.

### *Why Co-ops?*

Co-ops have multiple bottom lines that include social and environmental as well as economic (or financial) objectives. While the financial viability and stability of a co-op is important to its members, the primary objective is to maintain access to the product or service supplied by the co-op, not solely to increase

the rate of return on their investment. Co-ops are also mandated to operate as closely as possible to at-cost, which provides value-drive service to communities.

### Benefits of Co-operatives

Co-operatives have many other benefits to the communities in which they operate. For example:

- They build and enhance local prosperity and economic development, as money created by co-operative businesses is put back into the business, invested in the community, or shared amongst its members.
- Co-ops empower people in a democratic way and allow them to participate in businesses in a variety of sectors in a community.
- They are sustainable, staying in communities long after other businesses have left for more profitable locales.

### *Co-ops help social service delivery*

The co-operative model of business enterprise is an ideal service delivery option in the social economy. Co-ops can operate in conjunction with government to provide much needed social services in a way that is very responsive to the community, because it is owned by its members who reside in the community.

Studies have repeatedly shown that co-operatives can deliver services at a lower cost than the private sector. Further, a public-co-operative approach would ultimately increase client access to core services, such as housing, health care and home care.<sup>2</sup>

### *Co-ops meet public policy goals*

Ontario is facing severe policy challenges in many areas over the next few years. Ontario co-operatives have a proven record of finding innovative ways of confronting such problems. Co-ops can provide:

- Economic development opportunities in rural, remote or northern communities.

1. Mountain Equipment Co-op is the fourth largest democratic organization in Canada, with 2.6 million members.

2. Studies show that co-op housing costs 71% less than public housing projects. Health care co-ops have lower per-capita health care costs than private practice models.

# FACTSheet



- Development of Aboriginal communities.
- Integration of immigrants and individuals with special needs into Ontario communities.
- Implementation of community-based solutions to address environmental challenges.

## *Co-ops Work: A Rural and Urban Portrait*

Even in times of economic growth, rural communities often struggle. Without the prospect of long term economic viability, farmers and other rural landowners are under pressure to sell their land to investors. Financial institutions are deserting some of these very communities, essentially leaving them without access to essential business services.

The **River Village Co-operative Market** is a prime example of how a rural community came together to fill an important need. When the only grocery store in town was on the brink of closing in 2006, residents began exploring the idea of a co-operative. Replacing the grocery store was necessary for the community's survival. After extensive research over the winter of 2006 and an overwhelming positive response from the community, the co-op was incorporated in January 2007. With the help of many volunteers and local contractors in the community, the store was refurbished and opened its doors in April 2007. It currently has 300 members, 15 employees and occupies 5,000 square feet of retail space. With its inception, the co-op has helped to keep Teeswater on the map as a viable community.

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Urban settings also experience social, and economic challenges, since the size and pace of these settings can make it difficult for people to identify meaningful ownership and engagement opportunities.

**Co-op Cabs** is a very good example of how a co-op can address the common urban need of affordable and accessible transportation, while also providing a benefit through helping integrate new Canadians into the Ontario workforce. Formed in 1956, in the midst of competitive pressures, a group of independent taxicab owners decided to join forces to leverage their spending power. Today, 430 red and yellow Co-op Cabs roam the streets of Toronto, chauffeured by 700 drivers, many of whom are member-owners. Co-op Cabs is one of Toronto's largest multi-cultural employers and has received the City of Toronto's tender for accessible transportation.

These are just two successful examples from more than 1300 co-ops, credit unions and *caisse populaires* operating in Ontario. To learn about these and other co-operatives, visit Co-op Listings and Links at: [www.ontario.coop](http://www.ontario.coop)

## **Conclusion**

Co-operatives share many values and goals with government – democratic participation, job creation and growth, fiscal accountability, social and economic development, efficient delivery of services and public-private partnerships. This makes co-ops well suited to partner with government to serve the needs of communities throughout Ontario.

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- 1993 *The Co-operative Movement: An International View*. S.K. Saxena (20pp. \$6)
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