Mapping Online Social Economy Enterprises

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Purpose of Study:

- Identify Ontario online organizations that meet broad definition of social economy enterprises
  - strong social mission
  - member or public orientation
  - voluntary participation
  - member engagement in democratic decision-making
- and that rely on the Internet to meet their primary organizational objectives
Background and Rationale

- The Internet is the fastest growing medium of social and economic activity
- Online nonprofits are rarely included in any mapping of the social economy sector
- Invisible, dark matter associations (Smith 2000)
- Understudied area in the context of the social economy
Snowball Sampling
  - Key informants
    - Networks
    - Online newsletters, forums
    - Radio Interview
  - Search engines

Analysis of websites

Interviews (telephone, email) with members of five online organizations
Main Findings

- Identified 74 potential online social economy enterprises
- Main categories
  - Civil society, community development and health
- Five short case studies
  - Toronto SSP, Ontario Women’s Health Network, TorontoTheBetter, DAWN, K-Net
Toronto Social Purchasing Portal

- Economic development
- Database connecting socially responsible companies and businesses
- Financial and social bottom line
- Achieves objective by using technology
- Development requires substantial face-to-face contact
Ontario Women’s Health Network

- Health advocacy
- Online resources that help women make informed choices
- Directory, E-Bulletin, weekly E-Digest and links to other women’s resources
- No core funding
- Relies on face-to-face work for financial survival
TorontoTheBetter

- Economic development and advocacy
- Progressive online business directory
- Helps people put their money where their values are
- Operated by Libra, a unionised worker coop
- Use internet technology to vet businesses and employ a blog for news and member interaction
DAWN Ontario

- Advocates for equality for disabled women and girls
- Online since 1998, building capacity, educational resources, online forums and technical support
- Facilitation of cross-sectoral networks for social justice groups
- Operates without staff or funding
- Reliant on technology
K-Net

- Community development
- Telecommunication infrastructure, services, training and support to remote First Nation communities
- Enhances local health, education, social and economic initiatives and cultural self-determination
- International ICT leader in support of First Nation cultural self-determination
these communication tools provide a means for the remote and rural communities to now have a voice that can be heard anywhere in the world. They are now able to share and market their knowledge, experience and products as they see fit instead of depending on others to be taking care of them
Main Findings

- Many similarities with traditional social economy organizations
- Use of Internet on a continuum from little member participation to high member interactivity
- Case study organizations interested in further collaborative work with social economy researchers
Implications for the Social Economy

- Extends the reach of the social economy sector
- Explores contribution of online nonprofits to the social economy sector
- Resource exchange between traditional and online organizations
- Addresses research gap at the interface of the social economy and emerging technology
Conclusions and Next Steps

- Baseline research in understanding online social economy organizations and their contribution to the sector.

- Next steps:
  - Continue to identify online social economy enterprises
  - In-depth case studies
  - Surveys
  - Promote the inclusion of this type of organization within the social economy research agenda