

A SURVEY OF CO-OPS AND CREDIT UNIONS IN ATLANTIC CANADA

L. Theriault, UNB; R. Skibbens, Government of Nova Scotia; L. Brown, MSVU

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As part of its large research program, the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network decided in 2006 to prepare and conduct a survey of co-operatives and credit unions in all four provinces of Atlantic Canada. It was felt that coherent and up-to-date information on the co-operative sector in the region was lacking and that such a project would make a significant and timely contribution to the "mapping" or "profiling" of the social economy.

Dr. Luc Thériault from the University of New Brunswick took the lead of this project with the help of other members of the research network and the technical assistance of survey research consultants from York University in Toronto. The survey was administered between April and October 2007 and yielded 296 usable responses from co-operatives and credit unions across the region. This preliminary research report offers a first look at the information obtained by analyzing it overall and by breaking it down by language, province, and type of co-operatives. Other analyses on the data are possible, of course, and may be the subject of future publications.

RESPONDING ORGANIZATIONS

Overall, 80% of organizations responded to the English version of our questionnaire and 20% responded to the French version. Financial co-operatives (credit unions and caisses populaires) account for about 21% percent of responding organizations, housing co-operatives account for about 13%, and the remaining 66% is composed of a wide variety of "other co-operatives".

REVENUES AND EXPENDITURES

The financial picture of the co-operatives in Atlantic Canada is extremely diversified and thus difficult to summarize. Using the median values, we find that a "typical" co-operative in the region has revenues of about \$437,000 and expenditures of around \$343,000. But these figures are only aggregates and the ranges found for both revenues and expenditures are astounding.

The number of paid employees (defined here as those receiving T4 slips for income tax purposes) also varies widely between co-operatives as the mode is 0, the median value is 3, and the average is 23.6! More interestingly, we can say that the cumulative number of employees (part-time and full-time) employed by the co-operatives responding to this survey totals over 6,800.

We can estimate from the data collected in this study that approximately 40% of employees in the co-operative sector in Atlantic Canada are working full-time and approximately 60% are working part-time (less than 30 hours per week). This is a realistic estimate given that, for instance, cashier positions in financial co-operatives and retail co-op stores often work part-time.

MEMBERSHIPS

For all the responding co-operatives the average "age-in-business" is nearly 33 years. Generally, co-operatives are members of one or two federations or associations. The Nova Scotia Co-op Council and Co-op Atlantic in particular are among the dominant umbrella organizations for the sector in the region.

BOARD OF DIRECTORS

Co-operatives in Atlantic Canada generally hold one AGM per year, plus at least one other meeting. The typical Board of Directors overseeing these organizations is composed of 7 to 9 members. The Board of Directors typically meets 10 times a year (modal value). In about 24% of co-operatives, Board Members receive some form of compensation for their participation on the board. The use of volunteers (aside from board members) is found in about 55% of responding organizations.

Province	Cumulative Number of Memberships	# of Responding Co-ops
NB	261,049	97
NL	39,575	23
NS	141,823	125
PEI	86,350	35
Total	528,797	280

Table 24: Co-op Employment by Province (N=289)

Province	Cumulative Number of Employees	# of Co-ops Responding
NB	2,887	99
NL	806	23
NS	2,524	130
PEI	600	37
Total	6,817	289

COLLABORATION

Roughly between 40% and 60% of co-operatives are found to make voluntary contributions (the proportion varies with the type of contribution) to their local community. Collaborations with other co-operatives (i.e., within the co-op sector) is perhaps not as extensive as we had expected (22% of co-operatives report doing "a lot" of it and 26% report none of it) and the potential barriers preventing collaborations remain to be explored. As for the organization's internal capacity (for things like planning, administration and IT), it is among financial co-operatives that we find the greater capacity.

CO-OP PRINCIPLES

The survey shows that the internationally acknowledged Co-operative Principles are relatively well known in the sector (two thirds of co-operatives say that they are aware or very aware of them). However, the education of the public (as opposed to that of members) is probably one of the areas (with participation in public policy development) where responding organizations are the least likely to fully live by these principles.

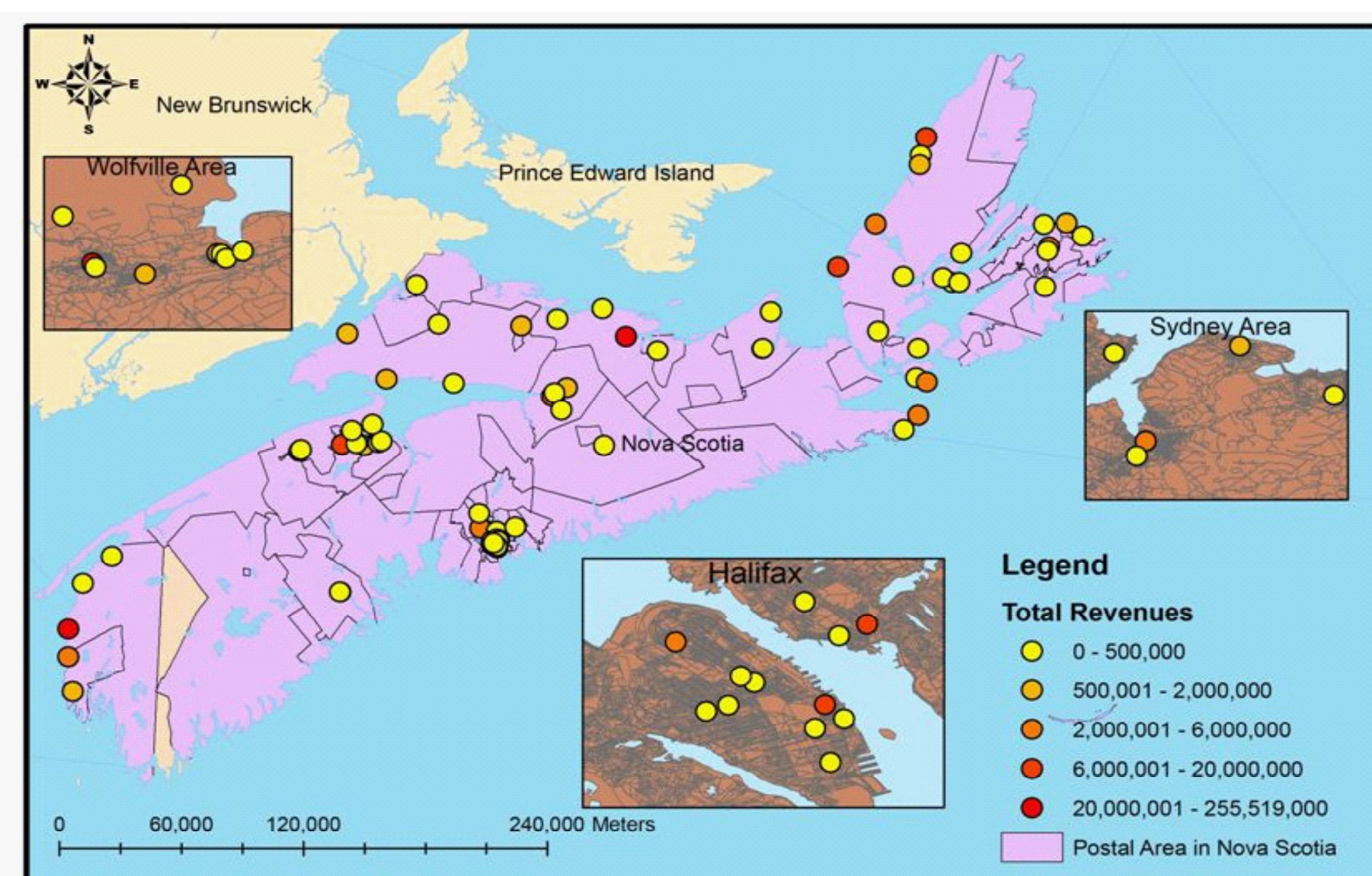
REPORTING

Finally, reporting practices of organizations are now extending relatively frequently into the reporting of social impacts (39%) but still relatively rarely into the reporting of environmental impacts (18%).

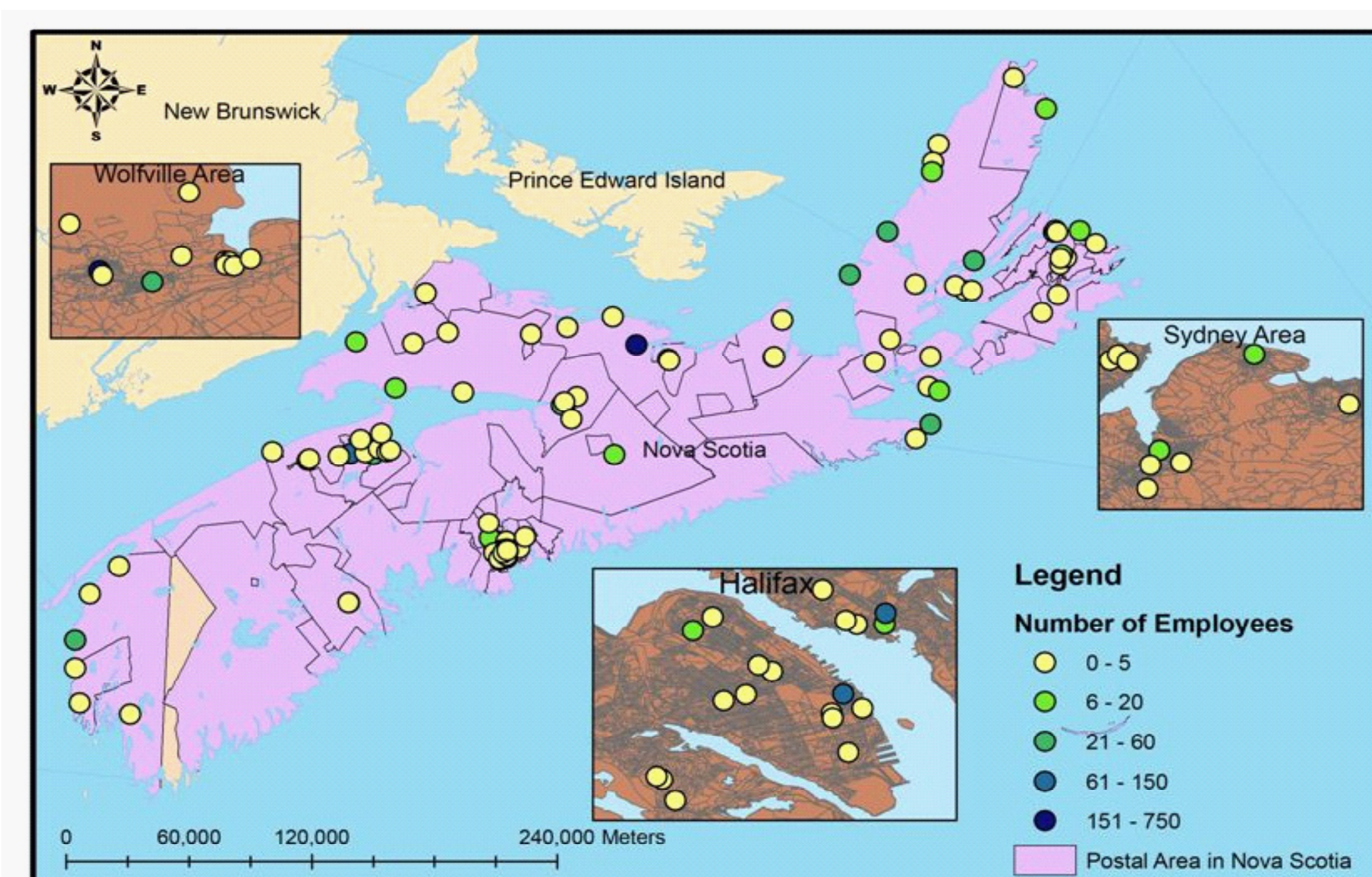
Table 23: Median Revenues and Expenditures

Breakdowns	Median Revenues	Median Expenditures
All co-operatives (N=228 & 220)	\$437,050	\$343,017
Co-operatives (n=152 & 143)	\$246,181	\$168,203
Housing Co-operatives (n=22)	\$193,066	\$188,738
Credit Unions/Caisses Populaires (n=54 & 55)	\$2,615,535	\$2,450,451
Co-operatives using English (n=184 & 179)	\$312,809	\$258,284
Co-operatives using French (n=44 & 41)	\$2,882,500	\$2,073,977
New Brunswick (n=85 & 79)	\$715,000	\$568,364
Newfoundland & Labrador (n=18 & 18)	\$1,651,000	\$1,291,849
Nova Scotia (n=96 & 96)	\$281,046	\$206,228
P.E.I.(n=29 & 27)	\$179,324	\$108,625

Revenues of Organizations -NS 2007



Employment Density -NS 2007



CONCLUSION

This preliminary analysis of the results of our survey provides some baseline information on co-operatives and credit unions in all four provinces of Atlantic Canada. Since this study is not a complete census of co-operatives, it is therefore hazardous to try to estimate precisely the global size and contributions to the region by the sector.

Nevertheless it is obvious, based on what has been reported here, that the co-operative sector is a significant player in the social economy of Atlantic Canada. The co-operative sector, like the non-profit and voluntary sector examined by Rowe (2006), is extremely diversified and it is likely that the interest and/or problems of large credit unions are not necessarily the same as those of small co-operatives active in the area of arts and culture, for example. Yet, the importance of the co-operative sector for the economic and social development of communities in Atlantic Canada calls for a greater attention to the adoption of government legislations, policies and regulations that are adapted to the realities and the cultures of co-operatives.

While an examination of the policy context for co-operative development and operation lies outside the focus of the present work, this survey provides sufficient information to make a case for government policies that are friendly to co-operatives. Both the federal government, through agencies like ACOA, and the provinces, through their regulatory authority on co-operatives and their general responsibility for stimulating socio-economic development, would be well advised to pay closer attention to the world of co-operatives in Atlantic Canada. Other researchers associated with the Social Economy and Sustainability Research Network will undoubtedly explore this issue further. It is the hope that the descriptive analyses provided here will help them in this task.

Rowe, P.(2006). The nonprofit and voluntary sector in Atlantic Canada: regional highlights of the National Survey of Nonprofit and Voluntary Organizations. Toronto: Imagine Canada