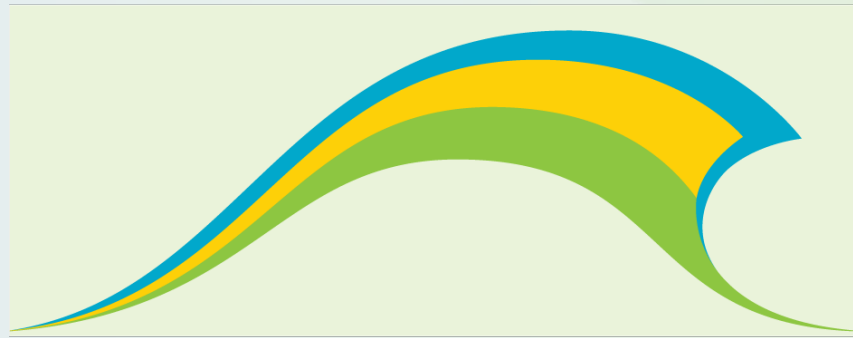# Exploring the Co-operative Difference in the Housing Sector

Réseau de recherche pour mesurer la
DIFFÉRENCE COOPÉRATIVE

Measuring the Co-operative Difference
RESEARCH NETWORK

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Measuring the Co-operative Difference Research Network

- A five year SSHRC funded Community University Research Alliance (CURA)

- The objective is to study if and how co-operatives are different from other organizational forms, in different sectors of the economy

- Our focus is on housing co-operatives, and the community partner is the Co-operative Housing Federation of Canada

Research Focus

- Research focus for this project we are presenting today is to explore if and how co-op housing is different from non-profit housing. We explore potential difference at the following levels:
  - At the developmental level, which includes how the housing initiatives emerged, the role of key actors, and the involvement of different kinds of organizations in the projects;
  - At the structural level (governance);
  - At the experiential level of those who live in the units.

Research Design and Methods

- We are using a flexible, case study design (Robson, 2011)
- We are comparing two affordable housing projects for seniors that emerged in NS in 2008 in response to a provincial program that supports the development of new affordable housing units; one is a co-op and one is a non-profit
- Data were collected through in-depth interviews with the individuals involved in developing the housing (N=6) and tenants (N=29), and we also reviewed key documents such as by-laws
- Findings we are presenting reflect a preliminary analysis of the data

Should We Expect Difference?

- Theoretically: Non-profit and co-operative organizations of different kinds are typically grouped together under the rubric of the social economy (for example, Thériault, 2012). Characteristics they share include democratic decision-making and existing for a social purpose.

- In the housing sector, non-profits and co-operatives have, taken together, been conceptualized as 'provisional infrastructure': they both consist of organizations responding to community needs, and have boards of directors with the capacity to manage and advocate for social housing (Skelton, 2000).

Should We Expect Difference?

- **Practically:**
- Co-operative and non-profit housing organizations have a different history: for example, co-operative housing at a national scale was advocated for by individuals in the co-op movement and they are represented by a national federation (CHFC); the non-profit housing sector is not organized in this way.
- Co-operative housing is allied with the larger co-op movement overall; the non-profit sector does not have an alliance or adhere to a set of shared principles.

Should We Expect Difference?

- **Empirically:**
  - compared to non-profits, tenants in co-operatives are more likely to be involved in governance (Loevinger Rahder, 1990; CMHC, 2003)
  - compared to non-profits, tenants in co-operatives indicate that they have greater social connections with other residents (CMHC, 2003), and express greater security of tenure (Loevinger Rahder, 1990; CMHC, 2003)

Background Information

- Based on the final report of the Atlantic Seniors Housing Research Alliance (2010), seniors in the Atlantic provinces:

    - Want to remain in their home communities for as long as possible
    - Prefer seniors' only housing
    - Are often living on limited incomes of less than $30,000/year
    - Often spend more than 30% of their income on shelter costs
    - Are active volunteers
    - Live in rural as much as urban areas

Case Studies

- **Background information**:

  - The housing facilities are located in communities of similar size (5,000 people)

  - Both have a similarly active social economy in their communities: both feature similar types of non-profit organizations, such as volunteer fire departments, and recreational associations. Both are served by credit unions and both had co-op food stores that closed.

  - Both projects arose because affordable housing for seniors was lacking in the community

Case Studies

- **Key actors:**
  - For the co-operative, the instigator of the project was a staff person from the local office of the provincial co-op association. This individual approached a local community development corporation, and the executive director of the CDC agreed to take on the project. Staff at the CDC played the lead role in developing the project.
  - For the non-profit, the project was conceptualized by members of the social action committee of a local church. It was then discussed by a local umbrella association of non-profit organizations in the community, and they agreed the need existed and that a seniors' housing association should be formed to develop it. A core group of volunteers played an integral role in developing the project.

Case Studies

- **Community involvement in projects:**
  - Consultation: Both the co-operative and the non-profit held consultation sessions with the local community to determine both level of interest and to get feedback on features of the housing.

Case Studies

- **Community involvement in projects:**

- In-kind contributions: The co-operative organization received in-kind contributions of land (from the province), technical assistance (from another CDC), and furniture (for the common room).

- The non-profit received in-kind contributions of land (from the local credit union), furniture (for the common rooms) and labour (work parties that assisted with the construction). Both were able to obtain at least some inputs (like building materials) at low cost from local business people.

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Case Studies

Project design:

- Neither the non-profit or the co-operative feature any kind of green design. This is perhaps a constraint of the provincial funding program; contributions to capital costs are not unlimited, and the emphasis is to create apartments with affordable rents.

- Neither the non-profit or the co-operative incorporate design elements that allow seniors to age in place (ex. extensive grab bars or walk-in showers).

Case Studies

- At the developmental level, a co-operative difference is not observed.

Case Studies

- **Involvement of seniors in governance:**
  - The co-operative organization has seniors on the board of directors: 4/10 directors are tenants. This has been a recent development in the co-operative; when the facility opened four years ago it had no tenants on the board. The volunteer who spearheaded the development of the co-op was focused on outcomes, not on structure.
  - The non-profit organization has no tenants on the board. By-laws exclude tenants from being directors as it is considered a conflict of interest.
  - At the structural level, a co-operative difference is observed, but it's not entirely as we expected.

Case Studies

- **Experiences of the tenants:**
  - **Life transitions:** Many expressed that they are in a transitional phase of life, experiencing increasingly isolation and a gradual loss of independence.
  - **Reasons for moving to the housing**: Tenants in both buildings commonly spoke about living by themselves in large homes, about being afraid of being alone, about not being able to maintain their homes or age in place before choosing to move to their current rental housing.

Case Studies

- **Excerpts from interviews**:
  - "When I was home I was alone and I didn't like that."
  - "It's awful hard to leave your home, but you soon forget – you've got to anyway. You've got to make up your mind."
  - "My husband had passed away, and I lived in my home for five years after that. Too many memories. It was a big home, a three bedroom home. You know, we raised our family there. It was just getting too much for me to take care of, so I decided to sell it."

Case Studies

- **Experiences of the tenants:**
  - **Social aspects:** Research participants overwhelmingly spoke about the social aspects of their new housing: making new friends, participating in group activities and using the common room, and developing support networks.

Case Studies

- **Excerpts from interviews**:
  - "That part I love. Usually there are little gatherings out here and someone comes knocking on the door inviting you."
  - "We have a great crowd here. They're the kind that if they don't hear anything coming from your apartment and it's ten o'clock in the morning, they'll be banging on your door."
  - "I could live on my own, but if you want company…a lot of people want company as they get older."

Case Studies

- **Experiences of the tenants:**
  - **Providing input:** Co-op tenants communicated their concerns to tenant board members living in the building; in the non-profit concerns were submitted to a suggestion box or the property manager.
  - **Control over their housing:** Co-op tenants felt they had some say over who could move into the housing as well as financial decisions. Co-op tenants also felt they could band together to make changes and advocate for each other.

Case Studies

- **Excerpts from interviews**:
  - "I think that we are going to have more input into new tenants coming in."
  - "…we have more voice in things."
  - "I think it's a really good thing because then we know what is going on. Because in the rest of the seniors homes, I don't think that they know what is going on. So I think we're fortunate because we know there are some people in this building that are on the board."

Case Studies

- **Experiences of the tenants:**

  - **Involvement in governance**: Seniors living in both buildings expressed mixed feelings about being involved in governance. Both groups felt that having tenants on the board was beneficial. However, some residents in both buildings felt too shy or old to participate, while others felt like they no longer wanted that kind of responsibility.

Case Studies

- **Excerpts from interviews**:
  - "Because [the board] has it all.... they have it by themselves and they don't ask us input on anything or anything like that."
  - "I wouldn't mind being on the board just to give your input, but [not] to take a position like secretary or treasurer, something like that."

Conclusions

Conclusions with regard to the co-operative difference:

- Both housing organizations share similar characteristics typical of social economy organizations, with the unique difference of the co-operative being tenant involvement.

- The data supports the concept of the social economy as a 'toolbox' (Brown and Millar, 2012) where different forms of organizations emerge and evolve to meet community needs and aspirations.

- There is much going on in seniors' housing initiatives beyond organizational form; in other words, seniors who live there are dealing with significant transitions and establishing support networks.

Conclusions

Conclusions with regard to seniors' housing:

- The province should consider providing more guidelines for all organizations developing seniors' housing; such as guidelines which would allow seniors to age in place for a longer period of time (walk-in showers, grab bars etc.) and guidelines encouraging more involvement of seniors in governance