

The Conversion to Co-operatives Project (Co-opConvert)

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Project Summary

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Rationale

A major challenge for Canada's 1.17 million small- and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) is large-scale closures due to the growing number of retiring owners that lack a formal succession plan; it is estimated that only between 9% and 25% of the current 500,000 retirement-aged owners have a succession plan (Bruce & Wong, 2012; CBC, 2011; ISED, 2016; Israelson, 2017). Should this wave of SME closures occur, jobs and the socio-economic wellbeing of communities will be threatened (Blackwell, 2015); indeed, estimates suggest that over one third of the private sector workforce will be affected (Parkinson et al., 2015). Retiring owners usually seek private-sector purchasers, but another option is business conversions to co-operatives (BCCs), which include worker co-operatives (with employees as the members), multi-stakeholder co-operatives (with employees, investors, and consumers as members), or other employee ownership models (Jensen, 2011; Lingane & Rieger, 2015; Quarter & Brown, 1992; Vieta, 2016a). The research on BCCs shows that they save jobs and preserve the productive capacities of communities (Sanchez Bajo & Roelants, 2011; Vieta et al., 2017; Vieta, 2019; Zevi et al., 2011), but BCCs generally fly under the radar in Canada. While Canada has had some successful experiences of BCCs through the leadership of local community developers and co-operative sector federations (Coté, 2007; CCA, 2009; CMC, 2017; CWCF, 2005; Quarter, 1995), the model's potential is mostly untapped.

The Conversion to Co-operatives Project (Co-opConvert) – funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada's (SSHRC) Partnership Development Grants, and supporting the objectives of SSHRC's Insight and Connection programs – is a research, knowledge mobilization, and policy development partnership designed to create knowledge and enhance sustainable cross-sectoral networks in order to better understand the BCC solution in Canada. It aspires to grasp more fully the BCC model in Canada and to explore why BCCs are not more compelling for Canadian business owners. The project brings together two of Canada's leading research centres for co-operative and social economy research – the University of Toronto's Centre for Learning, Social Economy, & Work (CLSEW) and the Université de Sherbrooke's Institut de recherche et d'éducation pour les coopératives et les

mutuelles (IRECUS) – with the co-operative development expertise of the national federation – Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada (CMC).

Two Primary Objectives of the Project

The Co-opConvert project and partnership has been formed to conduct research, mobilize knowledge, create capacity, and influence policy in order to create awareness of the co-op option for closing SMEs. It particularly aspires to understand why BCCs are not more compelling for Canadian SME owners who are retiring, to explore and map the organizational and contextual dynamics of the few BCCs that have formed in Canada, and to better grasp why and how BCCs are beneficial for sustaining jobs and for the socio-economic wellbeing of local economies and communities. Responding to SSHRC’s “Imagining Canada’s Future” challenge area “New ways of learning for an evolving society and labour market,” the project’s two key objectives are:

Objective 1: to identify the necessary enabling environments for BCCs in Canada (SSHRC Insight goals).

Objective 2: to build capacity for BCCs in partnership with Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada (SSHRC Connection goals).

Objective 1 seeks to generate knowledge about BCCs in Canada and the enabling environment for BCCs more broadly. Objective 2 consists of various collaborative efforts to build capacity for BCCs and mobilize knowledge in partnership with Co-operatives and Mutuals Canada.

Brief Literature Review

Several jurisdictions around the world have strong enabling environments for BCC creation, including specific legislation, capacity-building supports, anchor co-operative movements and federations, and targeted financing mechanisms (Adeler, 2014; Ben-Ner 1988; CECOP-CICOPA, 2013; Degli Antoni & Sabatini, 2017; Delahaye, 2005; McCain, 1999; Rothschild, 2015; Ruggeri & Vieta, 2015; Vezina & Girard, 2014; Vieta, 2019). *Enabling environments* for the development of worker-owned firms and co-ops (including BCCs) constitute a “growth ecosystem” (Hoover & Abell, 2016, p. 1), embracing “human, social and financial capital” with strong institutional and community “trust relations” (Gijssels et al., 2014, p. 268), supportive policy and funding, and engaging co-operative sector networks (Battilani & Schröter, 2014; Guillotte, 2016).

While there is emerging research of BCCs and their enabling environments in other countries (Chedid et al., 2013; Jensen, 2011; Ruggeri, 2010, 2014; TransfertoCOOPS, 2017; Vieta, 2010b, 2014a, 2014b, 2019; Vieta et al., 2017; Zevi et al., 2011), the dynamics of conversions in Canada – and their challenges and potential – have not been adequately researched. Some research on BCCs in Canada have been carried out (CMC, 2017a; CoopZone, 2017; Coté, 2007; CWCF, 2009, 2017; Hough et al., 2010; Geobey & Ronson, 2018; Quarter, 1995), but are few and mostly limited in scope given that conversions remain relatively rare. Thus, the BCC solution for succession issues and business closure is not well known in Canada despite their proven benefits for saving jobs, productive entities, and local community economies (Duguid et al., 2015; Quarter, 1995; Vieta, 2019). While there are some BCC supports in Canada, especially in the province of Quebec where unions and social economy organizations and initiatives have supported BCCs for some years (CoopZone, 2017; Coté, 2007; CWCF, 2017), and despite the

potential for robust enabling environments for BCC creation across Canada given its multi-billion dollar social economy sector (McMurtry, 2010; McMurtry et al., 2015; Quarter et al., 2017), the reality is that BCCs have been few in numbers, have varied greatly across the country, and most retiring owners, workers, unions, and policymakers are unaware of their potential for saving jobs and business (Bernstein & Hodge, 2008; Duguid et al, 2015).

The Co-opConvert Project addresses these knowledge gaps, seeking to broaden our understanding of BCCs in Canada, more deeply understand what constitutes their enabling environments, and contribute to the promotion of better policy for and awareness of the BCC solution for retiring owners and closing firms.

Theoretical Propositions and Research Questions

Developed from a synthesis of the extant international research literature on BCCs, the following theoretical propositions (ThP) and main research questions (RQ) drive this project:

ThP 1: BCCs emerge and thrive in regions with strong enabling environments.

- RQ 1: What are the main BCC enabling environments from around the world?
 - RQ 1a: What are their main characteristics (i.e., policies, programs, financing/funding, legislation, key animators and leadership, social capital, supportive networks, etc.)?
 - RQ 1b: What are the key indicators of their robustness?
- RQ 2: How many BCCs have existed in Canada (historically and currently)?
- RQ 3: What types of BCCs have existed in Canada (historically and currently)?
- RQ 4: What are Canada's BCC enabling environments?
 - RQ 4a: What are the main characteristics of Canada's BCC enabling environments (i.e., policies, programs, financing/funding, legislation, key animators and leadership, social capital, supportive networks, etc.)?
 - RQ 4b: How do BCC enabling environments in Canada compare and contrast to BCC enabling environments from around the world?
 - RQ 4c: Why are BCC enabling environments in Canada not as robust as in other parts of the world?
 - RQ 4d: How can more robust BCC enabling environments be fostered in Canada?

ThP 2: BCCs tend to emerge in contexts of micro/macro-economic or micro/macro-social challenges or crises with businesses, economic/market sectors, livelihoods/jobs, or communities.

- RQ 5: What are the situations (opportunities or challenges/crises) that motivate the creation of BCCs around the world?
- RQ 6: What are the situations (opportunities or challenges/crises) that motivate the creation of BCCs in Canada?

ThP 3: BCCs are viable solutions for retiring business owners' or closing firms' succession plans.

- RQ 7: Why and how are BCCs viable for firms facing succession, closure, or other continuity issues (internationally and in Canada)?

- RQ 8: Who are the key stakeholders and animators of BCCs (internationally and in Canada)?
- RQ 9: What are the business succession or conversion knowledge, preferences, and plans of retiring owners in Canada? (E.g.: How open are retiring business owners to the idea of BCCs? How do retiring owners learn about BCCs? What new skills, capacities, and attitudes and values must be acquired by retiring owners in order to carry out and sustain BCCs? What learning and capacity building opportunities exist (or should exist) for carrying out and sustaining BCCs for retiring business owners in Canada?)
- RQ 10: What are the business succession or conversion knowledge, preferences, and plans of other key stakeholders of firms facing closure or succession issues (besides owners) in Canada (including employees/workers, unions, co-operative developers and other sectoral animators, policy makers, and community organizations)? (E.g.: How open are key stakeholders to the idea of BCCs? RQ 10b: What possibilities and barriers exist for key stakeholders for choosing the BCC solution? What new skills, capacities, and attitudes and values must be acquired in order to carry out and sustain BCCs? What learning and capacity building opportunities exist (or should exist) for key BCC stakeholders in Canada for carrying out and sustaining BCCs?)

ThP: 4: BCCs contribute positively to saving/securing jobs, productive capacity, or for broader community economic development.

- RQ 11: How are the contextual dynamics of BCCs different and similar across Canada (social, economic, political, cultural, environmental)?
- RQ 12: What are the organizational dynamics of BCCs in Canada (including organizational structure, productive/service delivery processes, conditions of work and labour relations, leadership/management, governance and decision-making, participation and democracy, competitive scenario, etc.)?
- RQ 13: How have BCCs contributed to saving/securing jobs in Canada?
- RQ 14: How have BCCs contributed to saving/securing businesses and productive capacity for local communities in Canada?
- RQ 15: How have BCCs contributed community economic development Canada?
- RQ 16: Why might BCCs ultimately close in Canada, and what additional supports might be needed to prevent BCC closures?

Research Approach

The Co-opConvert Project deploys a mixed-methods approach (Cresswell, 2014) to more profoundly understand Canada's BCCs and their enabling environments, committing it to robustly triangulated findings (Mason, 2002; Patton, 2002) grounded in "converging lines of inquiry" (Yin, 2014, p. 120). To do so, the research for Objective 1 consists of five data collection streams:

1. *An international scan of BCC experiences*, deploying deep literature reviews and documentary scans of the most important dimensions for BCC enabling environments revealed by the international research literature.
2. *A current Canada-wide data set* tracking past and existing BCCs in Canada.

3. *A survey of retiring SME owners* from across-Canada with a representative sample of 500-1,000 retirement-aged SME owners to gauge for their knowledge of and propensity to facilitate a BCC solution.
4. *In-depth, semi-structured interviews* of other BCC stakeholders and key informants from various organizations involved with BCCs across Canada.
5. *Multiple embedded and contextual case studies*, selecting 12-18 illustrative and contextually embedded case studies consisting of currently operating and already-closed BCCs.

Building Capacity and Knowledge Mobilization

The project's Objective 1 addresses SSHRC Insight features by generating knowledge about the enabling environment for BCCs. The project's Objective 2 builds on Objective 1 and speaks to SSHRC's Connection feature. The knowledge that is being generated will be mobilized with Co-operatives and Mutuels Canada to enhance its development work with co-operative conversions.

The working relationship with CMC is taking place throughout the project but will be more pronounced in Year 3 as the research data are analyzed and prepared for various forms of dissemination. Objective 2 will embrace the following types of Connection activities to facilitate BCC development in Canada and, we hope, contribute to efficacious BCC enabling policy:

- **Community cafés** with key stakeholders and the general public in several cities across Canada. The cafés will be co-organized by the provincial arms of CMC and will also involve an outreach to the local business community, community organizations, and trade unions.
- **Presentations to business leaders and provincial government** units regarding the co-op option for retiring owners in need of a succession plan.
- **Regular fact sheet-style summaries of the research** (in English and French).
- **How-to guides (in English and French)**, on how to engage in a BCC project, including a description and analysis of available supports, funding, and tools.
- **Research dissemination and educational/capacity-building website, social media initiatives, and regular webinars (in English and French)**, including key conversion-to-co-ops and succession tools.
- **Encouraging the formation of a policy committee** of leaders from co-operatives, government, unions, and business to continue the dialogue on conversions-to-co-operatives beyond the end of the project.
- **Edited book(s), refereed journal articles, conference presentations, and teaching case studies.**
- Assisting in contributing to a **national and international network of researchers and co-operative sector developers** interested in the BCC solution, linking up with, for instance, the [International Co-operative Alliance's Committee on Co-operative Research](#), the [International Labour Organization's Cooperatives Unit](#), and the [International Summit of the Workers' Economy](#).

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