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Gender-Sensitive Public Policy on Community Economic Development (CÉD) in Québec: an Oxymoron?

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines a debate that occurred in the province of Québec between 1996 and 2003 around the implementation of public policies regarding community economic development (known as *social economy* in francophone areas) and their ability to respond to and take into account women's unpaid domestic and community work. Although the demands of the women's movement were finally set aside by government, the genesis of this debate remains interesting in that it mobilized local and regional authorities as well as women's groups for over 5 years. It was important as an enactment, though short lived, of a radical feminist agenda in a neo-liberal environment. This paper will present the results of an extended case-study on this experience that covered nearly half of Québec's territory; data was obtained through direct observation, archives, open-ended interviews of key-informants and focus-groups of *social entrepreneurs* and employees of CED projects. Empirical as well as theoretical results of this research will be presented.

This paper presents a case that took place in the province of Québec, Canada, between 1996 and 2000 and involving government authorities and women's groups around the implementation of a public policy on community economic development (Jetté, 2008; Watson, 1999). It was seen as a response to the demands of a social movement and illustrates the difficult processes by which gender-sensitive policies come to light.

This policy was implemented by the Parti Québécois, a socio-democratic party defending Quebec's accession to independence, in a period when its actions were

directed towards the decentralizing governance and reducing government. On the other hand, it was still trying to tend to its own left wing and to an important part of its electoral base: community groups, women's groups and trade-unions.

The women's movement in Québec had been quite vocal and influential since the mid 1970s, and had organized a successful *Bread and Roses* March on the National Assembly in 1995 (MFCP, 1995). One of the demands of this March was that of the recognition and funding of women's unpaid community work. More precisely, they demanded better government funding for community development. This March took place just before the second Referendum on Quebec independence (which the Parti Québécois lost by only 0,5%). Quite possibly so as not to alienate an important political base, the government of the Parti québécois responded favorably to the demands of the women's movement. A new public policy was concocted rapidly in 1996.

It is important to mention that Québec's very vocal provincial women's coalitions were sidelined when this policy came into being, because the Quebec government had chosen to interact directly with the regional coalitions of women's groups¹. This case study therefore focuses mainly on regional women's groups' coalitions' strategies in each of Québec's 17 administrative regions. This policy was completely decentralized from the outset and was to be implemented with representatives of regional women's groups' coalitions' as full participants in the decision-making process (Favreau, 2008). It should also be noted that government spending on social programs was being drastically cut at that time (Côté, 2000, 2003). This paper will examine the process by which issues of gender equity were at first included, then excluded from funding criteria for community economic development and how this funding policy for community economic development, as CED became an important aspect for public policy strategy.

1. Methodology

¹ We refer here to the "Tables régionales de groupes de femmes". These coalitions were set up in each of the 17 administrative region of Québec.

In order to better understand the dynamics of this process, we conducted a series of semi-structured interviews from 1997 to 2002 with key informants in 7 of Québec's 17 regions: regional government authorities, women's groups, CED informants were interviewed. We also conducted focus groups with project developers who had obtained grants from this program and with employees hired on these budgets. We also conducted a telephone survey and interviewed representatives of all the funded projects in order to document the scope and nature of each project, and consulted archival material

We thus gathered data on budgets, project selection criteria, number and characteristics of jobs created through these grants. We were also able to better understand the decision-making processes of the regional grant committees and the impact of these projects on women's groups within each region. We documented the initial policy implemented with the presence of regional women's groups in the decision-making process, and the second policy implemented in their absence. With this information, we established a profile of stakeholders and strategies chosen both by regional authorities and regional women's groups.

2. CED, *social economy*, regional governance and decentralization in Québec

In order to better understand these dynamics, we must contextualize the issues at hand. What we identified as "community economic development" or CED in the title of this paper is generally referred to since the mid-1990s in Québec as "*social economy*", as is the case in the francophone world. This terminology is now taking foot in English Canada and is increasingly popular in Spain and Latin America. The concept and history of CED practice is related to North America and the anglo-saxon world. It is still very much present in Québec, but the French tradition of *social economy* is now the dominant paradigm. Though not identical, these concepts both refer to a third sector, distinct from public and private enterprise, where economic projects adopt social goals benefiting the community.

The Quebec provincial government issued vague guidelines and identified only general implementation procedures for *social economy* funding. This research

analyses the dynamics of this policy implementation. It was not a study on the *social economy* as a “sector” or area of practice, which rather refers to socially profitable economic activities and their individual and organizational agents. We will focus on the dynamics around the implementation in 1996 of this social economy policy by the Quebec provincial government. This policy was directly decentralized to regional authorities or *Conseils régionaux de développement (CRD)* then further decentralized in 2001 to local authorities known as the *Centres locaux de développement (CLD)*. Though short lived, it remains a first inasmuch as regional and local authorities shared decision-making processes with women’s groups. Documenting this experience makes it possible to better understand the dynamics of this experience where decision-making agents share administrative objectives but also carry very different perspectives and strategic objectives.

But why did the Quebec provincial government open the door so rapidly to regional women’s groups as stakeholders in the decision-making process? It did so in the wake of the *Bread and Roses* national March on the Quebec National Assembly. It first created a Québec-wide steering and advisory Committee on the *social economy*, the *Comité d’orientation et de concertation sur l’économie sociale (COCÉS)*, to which it appointed representatives of different provincial women’s groups. Though it never did implement this committee’s report, which was quite encompassing, it did adopt a very gender-sensitive and rather feminist initial viewpoint on the *social economy*, women’s groups being at that time the most visible political actors in this field. The Premier then convened a *Socio-economic Summit* in 1996 where leaders of different sectors of Québec society were invited : labor, community groups, business leaders, etc. Two sectors were invited for the first time: the *Chantier de l’économie sociale (Social Economy Committee)*, created for the Summit, and the women’s movement, represented by Françoise David, president of one of the provincial coalitions, the *Fédération des femmes du Québec* and initiator of the *Bread and Roses March*. Their presence at this Summit underlined the provincial government’s interest in taking into account recent calls for public funding of the *social economy* and its interest (or need) to include women’s groups as an political agent on the provincial scene. This being said, the main item on the agenda of this Summit was civil society’s

endorsement of a new government agenda introducing hefty cutbacks in public spending.

Immediately following this 1996 Summit the government of Québec implemented the policy on *social economy* which is the topic of this case study. It was labeled at the time by the women's movement as a positive response to the demands of the 1995 March. But although the *Fédération des Femmes du Québec* had been convened to the Summit, it had not been consulted on this new policy and much less on its implementation. As a matter of fact, they were circumvented. As it turned out, regional committees were struck to implement this policy, the *Comité régional d'économie sociale (CRÉS)*. By government decree, at least 50% of the members of these *CRÉS* were to be delegated by regional women's groups or the national advisory board on women's issues (*Conseil du Statut de la Femme*). The mandate of these 17 *CRÉS* was to produce guidelines criteria for funding *social economy* projects on their territory.

Despite their doubts and fears about the impact of these policies on women and on women's groups (COCÉS, 1996; Côté et al., 1998), and despite poor strategic and financial support offered to the *CRÉS* by the provincial government, the *Chantier de l'économie sociale* and provincial women's groups' coalitions, regional women's groups' coalitions participated massively in the *CRÉS*. They wanted the opportunity to participate with regional authorities in the decision-making process related to this policy, because this would enable them to overview the implementation of the policy and influence its gender-sensitive nature. This would also enable them to better operationalize a feminist perspective of *social economy*, and gain recognition by regional authorities of their overall contributions to the *social economy* of their region. In practical terms, they expected to create decently paid, long-term jobs in the *social economy* (Relais-femmes et al., 1997). Of course, they also wanted funding criteria to enable local and regional women's groups to apply for funding in this new program. They thought "new monies" were being injected in this policy, although they later realized that this had not been the case. So women's groups regional coalitions spent a lot of volunteer time and energy over the scope of three years in these *CRÉS*, clearly assuming a leadership role in their respective regions.

From 1996 to 1999 these 17 regional *CRÉS*, without contact with each other, were immersed in an intense debate on the definition of *social economy* and the choice of project selection criteria. During this period, the *CRÉS*' structure also changed twice : these changes were all mandated unilaterally by the provincial government. In its initial version, *CRÉS* membership was composed of an equal number of government and women's groups representatives. Its second format had a broader membership and included community groups and trade-union representatives, with women's groups maintaining leadership. Finally, its last version oversaw the merger of the *CRÉS* with its Regional Development Council (*CRD*)².

3. Theoretical construction and empirical implementation of *social economy* as public policy

Originally *social economy* designated alternative means of economic production incorporating social goals and considerations. It appeared in XIXth century France in the wake of liberalism, as a social philosophy opposed to capitalism, a form of collective rationalism advocating economic and social independence for excluded groups through self-managed businesses and institutions (Gislain and Deblock, 1989; Jeantet, 2008). This utopia was aimed at influencing the development of capitalism from a collective, rather than individualistic, standpoint. Cooperation and mutualism were the founding blocks of *social economy*, while the accumulation of individual wealth was the hallmark of economic liberalism. As a utopia and a social movement, *social economy* lost intellectual ground and was relegated in the XXth century to the status of a minor movement or philosophy, because of the hegemony of marxism as the dominant anti-capitalist framework. Thus shed of its radical nature, the *social economy* movement and philosophy were co-opted by social corporatism, mainly by the conservative wing of the Catholic Church, which, it should be reminded, was very influential in Quebec until the 1970s.

From an empirical standpoint, *social economy* refers to a field of social and economic activity, albeit poorly circumscribed and heterogeneous. In its traditional form, it

² The *Conseils régionaux de développement (CRD)* were the planning and development bodies in each region.

comprises various types of businesses such as cooperative credit unions, trade union investment funds, coop printing shops (Malo and D'Amours, 1999: 47–58). In its “new” form (the *new social economy*) it comprises community development businesses, but also various community initiatives not necessarily built on an entrepreneurial model. Most people agreed in Québec when this policy was implemented in 1996 that there was no single conceptual or operational definition of *social economy* (D'Amours, 2007). And as a concept, it was rarely used in CED practice or community initiatives: the philosophy and the concept of a *new social economy* had not yet permeated community groups. The definition *social economy* was theoretically and empirically constructed in Québec through the genesis of this public policy.

An abundant literature on *social economy* emerged concurrently with this experience. It first criticizes a gap existing between the “social” and the “economical”.

“The dominant vision, shared by the business and government sectors, is ... that the private sector is the only one that generates wealth, while State-related sectors are merely parasitic—socially necessary, of course, but unproductive and totally dependent on the success of the private sector. From this standpoint, the social is not only separate from the economic, it is subject to it... This is a mistaken conception of the relationship between the private and public sectors, and between the economic and social spheres; furthermore, it ignores the third sector represented by social economy. In reality, when it comes to development nothing is strictly private or strictly public [our emphasis].” (Aubry and Charest, 1996)

but then rapidly reverts to presenting the *social economy* as filling this gap and constructing a definition of the *social economy* as that of a third sector, distinct from the private and public sectors. The idea of a continuum is definitely set aside.

“The new social economy refers to the dimension of economic and social reality that is located neither in the traditionally private sphere (for-profit enterprises) nor in the public sphere [our emphasis].” (Aubry and Charest, 1996)

This notion of an intrinsic division between the economical and the social is precisely what was questioned by the *Bread and Roses March*, inasmuch as the economy was presented as rooted in a society created by women’s unpaid domestic and community work. Indeed, all economic activities, even those constituting the core of market economy, are presented by feminist and other social theorists as rooted in social relationships, be they ethnic, political, family or community oriented (Granovetter 1992; Houle and Sabourin, 1994). One could therefore identify different social

economic forms on the basis of their social rather than economical characteristics : types of circulation, social sites and networks, types of knowledge rather than product and type of production. One could also postulate that all social forms constitute a form of economic activity. As such, informal exchanges between social actors could be construed as a form of economic activity, even though they are not included in national accounts and classical economical concepts. Feminist theorists have addressed extensively these classical categorizations of work, economics, society and household (Waring, 1999; Delphy, 1990; Guillaumin, 1992; Walby, 1997). And women's groups tried to apply these concepts in the emergent neo-liberal discourse in Quebec social policy through the 1995 *Bread and Roses March* and their leadership role in the *CRÉS*.

In 1995 Québec's women's groups rallied to their favor a vast majority of the population and public opinion (the 10-day March was widely covered by national television) and to one of their main demands: more public investment in local communities, to finance women's volunteer community work :

“(to finance) the resources created by communities in order to improve their living conditions. (This is done through the work of community groups) fighting inequality and discrimination, social isolation, promoting mutual aid and empowerment, popular education, identity building and civic participation, assistance to the sick, elderly and disabled, childcare, literacy, social adaptation, etc. As we can see, these are vital resources for any community. So when we talk about social economy we are talking about the quality of human relationships rather than the over-consumption of manufactured products. Social economy is an alternative to the broad exclusion of many women from the market economy [our emphasis].” (Guay, 1993)

Although as time went by this position was not necessarily shared by authorities and other stakeholders, women's groups viewed the 1996 *social economy* policy as a direct response to these 1995 demands. On the other hand, for the government of Québec, this *social economy* policy became the key to mobilizing a third sector, so as to enable socially responsible economic projects through civil society rather than government agents.

4. The struggle for the control of discourse and local budgets in *social economy*

The unresolved issue of an operational definition of the *social economy* was “downloaded” to the 17 regional committees (*CRÉS*) responsible for the application of

this new policy, one for each region. They were also mandated to allocate regional budgets to *social economy* projects, and had therefore to identify locally the criteria for funding, based upon their own operational definition of *social economy*.

Regional women's groups' coalitions participated in these committees on a massive scale, each in their own region. The *CRÉS* were originally composed of four representatives of women's groups, one representative from the *Conseil du statut de la femme* and four representatives from regional representatives of the provincial government or of representatives of regional authorities (Ninacs, 1998). Feminists had a majority vote on these committees. Regional authorities and women's groups had never before worked together. And the women's movement in Québec had been organized at a provincial, rather than regional level, and had never before shared decision-making responsibilities. It had denounced injustices and formulated demands, as a "counter-hegemonic force" (Michaud, 1995; Brodie, 1992). But with the 1990s provincial neo-liberal agenda prioritized decentralization and focused on the economy; regional women's movement had to rapidly adapt their strategies and arguments to a new paradigm. They did so by adopting a feminist discourse on the economy and a feminist model for regional development. Each regional women's groups' coalition then focused their efforts on their leadership role in the 17 *CRÉS*es in order to assert their position as political subjects of the regional *social economy*, but at the same time as victims of a system that artificially excludes their informal economic activity from public sight and public policy.

Hoping to gain credibility and legitimacy as a social force, regional women's groups' coalitions embarked on this new terrain without full knowledge of where it would lead them. They then had to build new alliances with government and private sector agents. This put a strain on some traditional alliances with other grass-roots or community groups. Of more importance in this case, alliances with community economic development groups or *social economy* groups were often minimal and difficult. The *Chantier de l'économie sociale* which represented the *social economy* sector nationally considered itself as the leader of this *new social economy* sector, but was not gender-sensitive and had very little presence outside of Montreal.

The definition of *social economy* put forth by the women's groups in the discussions inside the CRÉSes encompassed formal and informal economic activity. *Social economy* was an alternative to women's social and economic inequality and a way to value women's unpaid labor. For women's groups, *social economy* meant "working with women on economic questions" (CRÉS respondent). This feminist conceptualization encompassed non-market activities of women's and community groups.

The operational definition of *social economy* promoted by the women's movement was articulated in 1997 following a broad consultation included : creation of stable jobs, decent working conditions, a salary above minimum wage and the production of goods and services destined to strengthen community (Relais-femmes et al, 1997).

After nearly a year of discussions, the operational definition adopted by the CRÉS in most regions was broader than that put forth by the provincial government, but narrower than the women's movement's proposed definition.

"(For women's groups, the social economy) should be understood in a broad, very comprehensive way, including all social infrastructure, and the government didn't accept this view." (respondent from the Ministère des régions)

"When the CRÉS were formed in 1996, three definitions of social economy were circulating: that of the Québec government, that of the Chantier de l'économie sociale, stemming from the 1996 Socio-Economic Summit, and the one elaborated by the women's movement in 1997. From these different definitions, several principles were distilled to provide a framework for assessing social economy projects: autonomy of agencies and groups (with respect to the State); democratic decision-making involving users, participants, members and workers; valuing the individual and the work over capital in the distribution of revenue and profit; and finally, activities based on participation, empowerment and individual and collective responsibility." (Gouvernement du Québec, 1998)

The women's movement definition of *social economy* differed from that of government and the *Chantier de l'économie sociale*. These differences were the source of countless discussions in CRÉS committee meetings. Government and Chantier definitions referred to *businesses and organizations associated with their specific community or sector*, while the women's movement definition referred to *initiatives that emerged from the communities themselves*, born out of the community's needs and set up by the community in question. Also, the *Chantier* connected *social value* created by these social economy projects with the *development of community enterprises*, as the governmental definition referred to a *financially viable social value*

of the social economy in the light of budgetary constrictions in social programs. On the other hand, the women's movement defined the social value of *social economy* projects as being measured by *social change* and the *work with and for the members (of the community)* (Relais-femmes et al., 1997; Gouvernement du Québec, 1998).

The government's definition linked the social economy policy to *job creation* and to *financial cost-effectiveness*, while the women's movement associated the *creation of stable jobs* with *added social value* and job creation in general as a response to poverty rather than an indicator of economic viability. The government thought that a *social economy* project should *generate its own revenue from the sale of its product or service* and in so doing generate an *entrepreneurial shift among community organizations*. The *Chantier* on the other hand considered that *community enterprises should generate revenue*, while women's groups stressed that *fees (and revenues) should not be compulsory* (Relais-femmes et al., 1997; Gouvernement du Québec, 1998).

For the government of Québec, two important issues were at stake: to respond or at the very least appear to respond positively to the public pressure created by the women's March while simultaneously introducing cutbacks in social spending.

"They needed to engage a significant section of the women's and community movements—whose mandates had been marginalized—on new terms, and this, in addition to reducing the budget, maintaining health and social services and creating new jobs." (Ninacs, 1998)

The provincial government therefore put forth a classical definition of *social economy*, that of a third sector producing goods and services, social enterprises being construed as its basic form of organization.

"The concept of "economy" refers to the production of goods and services, organizations based on the business model, and contribution to collective wealth. "Social" as a concept refers to the social rather than the economic value of this production. This value could be assessed through its contribution to the development of active citizenship and initiatives encouraging individual and collective empowerment. Social economy was organized according to the following principles and rules of operation: the common good, self-management, democracy, the primacy of the individual, and the principle of participation." (Gouvernement du Québec, 1998: 8)

Governmental assessment of the viability of a *social economy* project was to be made through economic and social criteria, but as time went on, were economic criteria became clearly predominant.

“The viability or cost-effectiveness of a social economy project’s viability was therefore twofold. From the economic standpoint it could be evaluated according to the number of jobs created, the business’ contribution to social economy and of course by its profits. From the social standpoint, cost-effectiveness was measured by the direct and indirect benefits to the community, whose members are an integral part of the social economy project.” (Gouvernement du Québec, 1998: 14)

For regional women’s groups, 1996 through 1998 were years where they invested greatly in this struggle to influence the terms of the regional public discourse and criteria for this *social economy* policy. Their “broad” definition of the *social economy* was not adopted or implemented, thereby quashing their hopes of public funds financing more of women’s unpaid community work. Their disappointment was as profound as had been their hopes after the 1995 March, especially in the light of thousands of hours of volunteer work invested in this issue.

The first regional *social economy* grants were attributed in 1997 on the basis of the “feminist” criteria. This consensus was short-lived and the new local authorities were put into place in 2000 generally adopted a very narrow definition and an entrepreneurial view of the *social economy*, which would rapidly exclude women’s groups from funding.

5. The implementation of a neo-liberal policy...on the ashes of a feminist vision

Though short-lived, the *CRÉS* funded several projects with these “feminist” criteria. Why not “try to develop *social economy* in the direction proposed by the *Bread and Roses March* (Respondent from the Ministère des régions)? Even local authorities in a certain number of regions shared this view. But these broader criteria for funding *social economy* projects were gradually eliminated and replaced by simpler, more easily enforceable and more entrepreneurial criteria that satisfied CED actors as well as the cooperative sector : clearly identified goods and services were to be produced and fees were to be charged by the *social economy* projects funded through this program. Free community services, informal activities were forthwith excluded from funding. Regional women’s groups thus retired from the *social economy* and were ejected as leaders, local business leaders were then invited to share in the decision-making process.

The tone in public discourse changed in regard to the “feminist” criteria for funding *social economy* projects. In the early stages of our research, even the most resistant informants characterized positively the feminist definition for *social economy*. In the latter stages, some even characterized the women’s groups’ position on *social economy* as “rigid and resistant to change”. It seems the winning side of an ideological battle always gets to define “change” and “modernity”. In 2000, some regional respondents even completely ignored women’s groups involvement in *social economy* sector between 1995 and 2000 :

“(Starting in 2000), social economy was positioned within the dynamics of this region’s development, which hadn’t been the case before.” (CRD respondent)

After 2000, women’s and community groups lost a lot of influence in the regional political process. According to them, social economy policies no longer promoted social change :

“Social economy is becoming institutionalized and standardized. We wanted something more ideologically based—we were maybe a little utopian in our thinking back then. . . . Now there is no criticism of the criteria; when they are dealing with bureaucrats people just say well, that’s just how it is. We have to do it that way. We have a budget deficit so it has to be that way.” (CRÉS respondent)

Unable to maintain their vision, which essentially emphasized social, rather than economic means and ends, regional women’s groups had succeeded in raising the awareness of regional stakeholders about their positions. But the second policy implemented throughout Québec in 2000 provided for new actors from the private sector and local government to partake in the implementation of the *social economy* policy. New dynamics and new debates quickly overshadowed a feminist model that had been viable but not synchronized with the provincial government agenda and local authorities’ agenda. The position of regional women’s groups at the forefront of this first social economy policy had been only transitory. Their uncontested regional leadership in the CRÉS was forgotten.

But regional women’s groups were able to move out quickly of political marginality and participate actively in other local and regional bodies. Still, the price they paid and will continue to pay is relatively high. Some groups have developed new strategies for regional visibility, mainstreaming strategies. But the articulation of women’s groups demands at the local level (Andrew, 2000) and the relationship of women’s groups to

the State (Masson, 1999) remained a concern and certainly a reflection of the manner in which civil society relates to the State in Québec (Vaillancourt, 2008a; 2008b).

The participation of women's groups in regional public arenas is a reflection of democratic processes, at the very least of the coexistence of different concepts of democracy (Fraser, 1989). In the case of *social economy* policies, the evolution of women's demands and the genesis of their participation in these decision-making processes testifies to a new generation of public policies characterized by a blurring of the frontiers between civil society and the State (Côté and Simard, submitted). It is also characterized by an ever-increasing complexity of decision-making structures, a constant transformation of frameworks and mandates and a continuous jockeying for position (Stavis, 2008). Women's groups still face the problem of obtaining serious consideration of their demands by regional bodies. They have developed expertise in participating in decision-making processes with regional authorities. They have developed new areas of interest and action, namely, the local economy.

At the same time, however, this new public policy on *social economy* and the debate it generated clearly symbolize the end of the social discourse for which the government of Québec had been known since the 1960s. It has now become clear that the vast majority of autonomous community organizations, including women's groups, will no longer have access to *social economy* grants, because their projects do not sufficiently correspond to the government programs' stringent economic criteria. And being relegated to the "social arena" is not a comfortable position in a context where economic discourse is dominant.

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