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Social Enterprise Brings Democracy to the Marketplace

By Zack Gross

They may never attain the reach or power of Wal-Mart but, while still only catering to a niche market, enterprises that encourage community economic and social development are making themselves felt in Manitoba. Whether it's a fair trade shop in Winnipeg or Brandon, or a community-led second hand shop in Lac du Bonnet, social enterprise is quietly but steadily finding its place in our province.

A social enterprise runs like a business but returns its profits to its home community. A fair trade social enterprise also makes sure that the products it sells are made under conditions that don't harm the producers or the environment. In Brandon, April 23rd to 29th is Brandon Fair Trade Awareness Week, featuring sales and promotional activities around town, including at the annual Rural Forum, a large business, government and tourism expo, held at the Keystone Centre.

One of the best known social enterprises might be the Salvation Army Thrift Shops, which provide good used clothing for those unable to afford - or not willing to choose - new clothes, while putting its profits back into its work with the “less fortunate” of society. Mrs. Lucci's in Lac du Bonnet is an example of a partnership of community organizations that provide job experience for challenged individuals and second hand goods for the less fortunate. Its profits, as well, go back into the community.

Quebec is by far the most active province in Canada in creating and supporting the social economy, with British Columbia coming up fast. Manitoba is seen as being ahead of the rest of the pack. A provincial fair trade network is currently in its formative stages, the product of social activists – student groups, labour, international development organizations, the church community and others.

Along with supporting Third World producers, it aims to nurture small-scale alternative enterprises in Manitoba. Rolling out, beginning in the fall, will be a web site, directory, learning materials and events aimed at promoting public knowledge about, and public investment in, products that improve the state of our province and our world.

But, it can be a bumpy road! The recent closure of the not-for-profit Westman Recycling Council depot in Brandon is a backward step, away from supporting local entrepreneurship and social conscience. The city has taken a social enterprise that employed many people who might otherwise be on welfare or in trouble, people who were often down and out or disabled, and shut it down, selling its environmentally-friendly recycling program to a company with no ties to, or mission to contribute to the betterment of, Brandon.

While the idea may have been to save money, the ultimate social cost may be high. WRC managers, who not long ago were named Bosses of the Year by the local Chamber of Commerce and Canadian Mental Health Association for their nurturing of staff and their innovative employment ideas, are now looking for other work. Community has been sacrificed, possibly out of short-sightedness.

Some large businesses are putting their toes in the waters of social enterprise. For instance, Starbucks now sells a brand of fair trade coffee along with its many other regular choices. Nike says it's being more careful not to buy its goods from child slavers and is actually purchasing small amounts of organic cotton for its production line. But, none of them offers the key ingredients of significant reinvestment of their profits in community development, or democratic participation of workers in their business operations.

We live in a world of stark inequities. Even the most even-handed and optimistic observers admit that eighty percent of the world's resources are controlled by just twenty percent of the population, almost entirely living in North America, Europe, Australia and Japan. Forty-two percent of the world's population – 2.5 billion people - lives on two dollars or less per day. Try walking in those shoes.

People-centred economics can raise people – the marginalized in our community and in communities overseas – to where they can enjoy good health and nutrition, be safe from disaster and military strife, and get an education and a job. Social enterprise builds social capital. As they say, everyone does better when everyone does better! We need corporate and civic leaders prepared to offer a larger role for community in their economic development plans.

Zack Gross is program co-ordinator at the Manitoba Council for International Co-operation (MCIC), a coalition of 36 development assistance organizations active in our province.